

# Does it Count?

BY MITCHELL VOGEL, EDITOR

**T**his issue of *American Academic* takes up the question of what constitutes “success” in higher education and what accountability measures should be employed to demonstrate that success has been achieved. The subject puts me in mind of an observation former AFT president Albert Shanker used to make: “Does it count?” was always the question students would ask when assignments were given. According to Shanker interested parties outside the classroom raised the same question when asked to evaluate school programs or funding. Just like the students, Shanker would say, we organize our activities primarily around “what counts” and so picking the right things to count is of great importance.

Today’s public debate about accountability is essentially a “Does it Count?” question. We are concerned in this, the second issue of our journal, with *what* should count, *how* it should be counted, *who* does the counting and *how effective* the counting measures are. It is not our intent here to deal definitively with every accountability issue, but we hope the readings will provoke clearer discussion and further study of the chosen topic. Our topic, Success and Accountability, historically has been blessed with a great deal of interest but, all too often, this interest has been obfuscated by sloganeering and extreme rhetoric. That, too, is obviously not our intent here.

Our publication comes at a crucial time. Our postsecondary institutions are re-evaluating themselves on a regular basis. At the same time, trustees and governmental leaders are seeking more and more involvement as stakeholders in our colleges and universities. At times these activities appear to be pitted against each other. It is our hope that the following articles will contribute to a better understanding of the nature of appropriate accountability. We

mean “appropriate” in at least three ways.

1. Appropriate in that the accountability measure is developed out of a clear sense of what we consider success, and the extent to which higher education institutions are achieving success on those terms.
2. Appropriate in terms of the proper stakeholder determining what counts. Who determines what is successful? Who determines what counts?
3. Appropriate in the sense that new measures of accountability should not work against those already in place.

Too much of the debate is focused on discovering each new accountability measure that can be instituted, rather than assessing what the institution needs to do to succeed, whether a new accountability measure is really necessary to assess institutional success, what measures are in place already, and what burdens and unforeseen consequences the accountability measure might provoke.

From the outset we should discard the idea that there is no accountability in higher education today. Before a faculty member is tenured, before a course gets approved, before a departmental budget is developed, many of the internal stakeholders are consulted repeatedly. Higher education is accountable through the annual review that each faculty member undergoes. It is accountable through its rigorous system for peer review of work content. It is accountable through its well-defined processes for approving new faculty positions and making curricular changes. The problem isn’t whether there is enough accountability, but is it the right kind?

Critics of institutional accountability say it is too faculty-centered and too oriented to internal academic processes. They call for more accountability for “outcomes”—student learning, graduation rates, placement rates, etc. The question the critics need to answer—and, often, do not—is why a new external accountability measure (such as a standardized “higher order thinking skills” test for students) is actually necessary. Is it because college students are not succeeding financially when they go out into the world? What is the evidence of that? Is it because students are ill-equipped to function as citizens in a democratic society?

In fact, there are examples of good things occurring when these issues are explored in a positive fashion. A brief look at any university's or college's governing principles or collectively bargained contract would reveal a number of examples. Most contracts have some form of student evaluations, peer evaluations or other accountability procedures built into them. Many also have incentives for exemplary service, teaching or research, and for faculty and staff remediation. These were developed collaboratively between faculty, staff and administrators in order to have professionals achieve strength and maintain their appropriate levels of excellence.

Unfortunately, examples of mutually developed terms of accountability are too rare. One concern frequently expressed about new accountability measures, for example, is duplication. Those in K-12 education pointed out that the new accountability requirements in the No Child Left Behind Act are at best duplicative and at worst work against the effective requirements already in place. These requirements are among those being reevaluated by the Department of Education at present.

The following articles continue this exploration of how higher education can demonstrate that it is succeeding in its multiple missions. The first article, by Kelly, probes the thoughts of a diverse group of 23 leading higher education stakeholders from all sectors of the higher education arena, both internal and external to the institutions. The common thoughts expressed by them offer some guidance on the elements of success that should serve as the basis for accountability measures. One of the common threads throughout the Kelly article is the overall positive value of American higher education. All 23 stakeholders, despite some misgivings, express the view that, overall, higher education is performing its job successfully.

This judgment also is shown in the research conducted in our second article by Goan and Cunningham of the Institute for Higher Education Policy (IHEP). They define criteria for success in meeting both societal and individual needs. Some of the criteria measured are unique to the IHEP study and show how the definition of success should determine the accountability measures. For example, the authors link higher education with reduced crime rates as well as increased volunteerism, productivity and consumption.

The three articles by Mundhenk, Eaton and Vestrich point out the advantages and disadvantages of utilizing both internal and external measures of accountability. While Mundhenk argues that external evaluation is not only necessary but inevitable, Vestrich raises some important concerns about external stakeholders being involved in matters that are not in their sphere of expertise. Eaton's article points out four major thrusts for those seeking comprehensive accountability. The first is her call for interested parties to participate in a dialogue that would maintain each institution's primary mission, academic freedom and the instructional leadership of the faculty, while addressing the legitimate concerns of the society.

The authors of the next two articles studied two accountability measures that perhaps would have been improved if Eaton's advice had been followed. Gold and Albert offer an insight into the use of graduation rates as an institutional evaluative instrument. In doing so, they acknowledge the importance of studying graduation rates but also demonstrate why these rates are an inadequate measure and are not appropriate for rewarding or punishing individual institutions. Another article, by Rainwater, explores the reasons that a new accountability program instituted with fanfare by the federal government failed and ultimately was abandoned.

In addition to these articles, two books dealing with accountability are reviewed in this issue. Kelly Risbey analyzes J.C. Burke's *Achieving Accountability in Higher Education: Balancing Public, Academic, and Market Demands* and Greg Dubrow offers us a review of Lloyd Thacker's *College Unranked: Affirming Educational Values In College Admissions*.

As you will discover in reading these articles, we are offering some new perspectives on accountability and success. We welcome comments. We also welcome new articles. Our next issue will deal with another important issue: that of Access. If you have some thoughts you would like to share on the subject, please submit them to [AmericanAcademic@AFT.org](mailto:AmericanAcademic@AFT.org).

Thank you and enjoy.

# Searching for Success in Higher Education

BY VIRGINIA MYERS KELLY

*Accountability, yes, but for what purpose? To determine appropriate accountability procedures for higher education, we must begin with a clear idea of what we expect our higher education institutions to accomplish, what they should be held accountable for. Virginia Myers Kelly interviewed and recorded the thoughts of 23 individuals on what constitutes success in higher education.*

—Editors' note

## Defining the Goal

**W**hat is success in higher education? It is becoming increasingly important that we address this question as the drumbeat grows from public officials around the country to install more “accountability” in higher education. This call for accountability often seems to focus on **devices**. Accountability is usually framed as a question of which system, which device—graduation rates, standardized tests, performance funding, vouchers, etc.—should be imposed on higher education in order to make decisions about funding or de-funding particular institutions.

Rarely, however, are critical prior questions addressed—for example, what are these institutions actually supposed to achieve, what constitutes success for them? Is it possible that we know enough right now to make an assessment about whether the institution is achieving its goals? How would any particular new accountability instrument measure and further success? Does the accountability instrument add something substantive to the procedures already in place?

For example, there is a growing movement to reward or punish colleges on the basis of their six-year graduation rates. Whether this makes sense or not, however, depends on our initial premises of success. If we believe, for example, that it is essential to get students in and out of college quickly in order for the institu-

tion to be successful, then graduation rates might make a good accountability measure—if students are given the financial wherewithal to achieve that goal. But if we believe that one element of success in higher education is accessibility, and we recognize that students who work may need to attend classes only part time, then rewarding or punishing colleges for achieving quick graduation rates wouldn't make sense at all as an accountability measure. This article will focus, not on accountability mechanisms, but on what constitutes success for higher education in the first place.

## Method

We followed a two-step procedure in addressing this subject. First, we conducted a review of literature on success and accountability. Our exploration included studies that looked at success and accountability from the national, state and local perspectives. Several national higher education organizations have been examining the levels and kinds of learning that colleges produce. Many of these projects were developed after the National Center for Public Policy and Higher Education issued its first “report card” on higher education, *Measuring Up 2000*.

The projects and studies we looked at included, among others:

- The National Postsecondary Education Cooperatives' (NPEC) activities in the area of “Student Success.”
- The American Association for Higher Education's Assessment Forum, which disseminates good practices in assessment.
- The Pew Charitable Trusts' Quality of Undergraduate Education project and various writing assessment projects, all linking assessment to the improvement of undergraduate education.
- Indiana University's National Survey of Student Engagement, a measure of good educational practice that has surveyed over 160,000 college students at over 470 colleges and universities (and has developed a new version of the survey for community colleges).
- The Business-Higher Education Forum (BHEF) initiative on Public Accountability for Student Learning in Higher Education. BHEF is a national organization that draws its memberships from American business and higher education leaders.
- RAND and the Council on Aid to Education's efforts to develop a value-added assessment of undergraduate learning.
- The American Association of Colleges and Universities' general education

assessment project

- Regional accreditation associations' reform movements that insist that institutional effectiveness be judged in terms of student learning.
- We found that many of these studies, which outlined a list of benchmarks or indicators for successful higher education systems, had been employed to develop state-wide goals assessments and performance reports.

Common themes began to surface from these readings: analytical thinking, productive work life, intellectual tradition, support for the economy, robust cultural life and accessibility. Based on these themes, we developed an initial working list of six indicators of success in higher education. These factors addressed either the impact of the educational experience upon individual students or the kind of impact the university or college made on society at large.

The elements of success for students were identified as follows:

- The ability to think analytically, and to present reasoned, clear arguments about complex issues using logic and creativity.
- Preparation for a productive life as a technical, intellectual or artistic worker.
- Exposure to intellectual traditions and high-quality work in humanities, sciences and social sciences.

Elements of success in terms of the institution's impact on society were summarized as follows:

- Creating a knowledge base that would support a strong and diverse economy—in other words, that would meet the community's economic needs, fill the jobs that need filling, and support public institutions with research and problem-solving opportunities.
- Creating a robust culture through art, providing a showplace and forum for cultural endeavors.
- Creating a more democratic, ethical and just society by providing educational opportunities for all and by promoting mutual understanding among students and the community at large.

With this information in hand, we conducted interviews, most by telephone, with 23 individuals, chosen for their experience, expertise and perspective.<sup>1</sup> Participants included faculty members, board members, university presidents,

policymakers, legislators and students. We discussed with the interviewees the working criteria we had developed, but only to get the conversations going. In general, the conversations were largely unstructured. What elements would success include? What would it look like? What focus would it have? What elements are more important than others?

While we do not pretend that our readings and interviews could cover fully the terrain of thinking about collegiate success, we did find that the elements of success developed through our readings and interviews resonated with individuals concerned about higher education from a variety of walks of life. Faculty members, for example, were not limited in seeing success primarily as the ability to “think great, esoteric thoughts.” Legislators were not limited to “churning out workers and saving money.”

## **Discussion**

In his book, *Achieving Academic Excellence*, Alexander W. “Sandy” Astin, director of the Higher Education Research Institute at UCLA, outlines different outcomes from the university and college student point of view.<sup>2</sup> The three he emphasizes are education benefits (e.g., knowledge, skill and value acquired), existential benefits (e.g., a college experience that was stimulating, positive, etc.), and fringe benefits (e.g., the later advantages of a particular “name” school or acquaintances and friends picked up during college).

Often definitions of “success” in higher education center around the experiences of individual students. One student counted among her expectations of a college, “meeting cool people.” Here are some of the major marks of success for individual graduates identified in the literature and in our interviews.

### **Success in offering broad access**

Many of the interviewees emphasized that a successful institution should be one that achieves broad diversity of access. Certainly public colleges’ and universities’ stated missions are to open their doors to all qualified comers and to create a plural environment, says Astin. “We need places where people learn how to participate in a plural institution and a plural society.” Educators should take advantage of the inquiring and inclusive environment nurtured on campus, to show students what the world could be like. The hope is they will carry and spread that sense of inclusion and community



throughout their lives, wherever they are after graduation.

“One of the strengths of American society in terms of our notions about ourselves is trying to be a society where a diversity of people, opinion, background, religion, ethnicity and attitude are a part of the fabric we wrestle with,” says John Austin, a member of the Michigan State Board of Education. Successful higher education, our participants argued, should play a paramount role in helping students and society at large meet that challenge. Steve March, an Oregon representative who sits on the state’s education policy committee, would add diversity of age to the mix. Such systems as Portland State University, where citizens age 65 and older can audit classes on a space-available basis, expand horizons for all students. “Diversity of ethnicity plus diversity of age will give a much richer tapestry of learning,” says March.

A successful postsecondary school ensures access and success for every student, of every socioeconomic status as well. This applies not only to community colleges, which often function as gateways for people who might not have access to more elitist institutions, but to all institutions of higher learning. James Earl Davis, a sociology professor at Temple University, insists success includes a diversity of students across the spectrum of higher education institutions.

Lara Couturier, at the Futures Report, agrees. “A successful higher education first and foremost recognizes that all students can succeed and all students deserve the chance to succeed. . . regardless of their background,” she says. Couturier recognizes differences in demographics and the challenges those present, but insists the universities must not use those challenges as excuses—some institutions have been successful in educating all kinds of students, and others must find a way to follow their example.

Reginald Robinson, a member of the board of regents in Kansas, quotes Bill Clinton when stressing the importance of success for every student: “We don’t have a person to waste;” Robinson believes institutions must stop being so selective and find ways to serve all the people, not just the cream of the crop. They need to train everyone to participate successfully in the workforce—not just giving them specific skills and certificates, but teaching them how to learn and instilling a love of learning so they are equipped for changes in their lives and in the marketplace.

Most institutions in America today are committed to increasing access and diversity in their student body, although cutbacks in federal and state funding for both institutions and students is making that increasingly difficult. The story of one of our interviewees, Adam Mangana at Brown University, illustrates the difficulty of achieving full access in practice. Mangana was one of the few African American students at Brown, and an economic minority besides. His experience growing up in subsidized housing had not prepared him for the expectations of this elite college. He had to learn deeply—not just regurgitate information. He also had to make football practice and games, hold down a job, and adjust to a culture different in many ways from the home he'd left behind.

Mangana dropped out. While he doesn't blame Brown for losing him after two years, he points out that success in higher education must include not just access for all, but attainment as well. "It's one thing to get students in the door, but is it good enough to do that and not get them through?"

When Mangana left the university he picked up some construction work. Then one day one of the crew was electrocuted. In the aftermath, his co-workers asked him why he was there. The conversation went something like this: "If I had the opportunity you had, dude . . ." He realized they were right – he couldn't pass up the opportunity to graduate from Brown, and he returned to classes.

Mangana wonders whether his graduation this past May was due to innate drive or circumstance, whether it was because his mother laid it out for him, telling him, "You're either weak or you're strong, you can make that choice," or whether there were enough systems in place at the university to welcome him back to campus. He is the only one of five friends, all African American, who graduated, he points out—and he did it a year later than he'd planned.

"I don't like to put the blame on the university," says Mangana. "I think it's all the individual's responsibility." But if universities are looking for places to improve, he suggests providing an outlet for the frustration experienced by outsiders new to campus culture. "Even for white students who come from the wrong side of the railroad tracks, it's quite an adjustment. We don't summer in Aspen, so you feel like you're coming up a little bit short when you have conversations and you haven't been to another country. It can wear on your self-esteem."

Mangana is pleased that a new social organization at Brown, the Brotherhood, has been formed as a support group for black males, whose numbers are small on this New England campus. In his own experience, he felt he had no one to talk to at college.

Uncomfortable with professors, he felt patronized when they told him his work was good enough and didn't push him further—he says they were afraid of being perceived as racist.

### **Success in instilling analytical ability, preparation to think and argue**

More than any collection of credits and courses, analytical ability is considered paramount for any graduate to be considered successful. Analytical thought, also referred to as critical thinking, is “the sweet spot of higher education,” says George Kuh, who directed the National Survey of Student Engagement (NSSE) to measure student experience beyond test scores. Defined as the ability to discern among many sources of information and rhetoric, critical thinking also engages the impulse to question and probe and challenge the world around us. If one tries to solve a problem in a conventional manner and fails, an educated individual naturally turns to more resourceful, creative, and perhaps less obvious solutions until the matter is resolved.

Closely linked to critical thinking is the ability to communicate, both in written and spoken form: the ability to argue one's points. For Joshua Smith, director of both the Center for Urban Community College Leadership and NYU's program in higher education, real success in the classroom occurs when he's able to provoke students into discussions—sometimes by taking ludicrous positions—and then watch them at the end of class, arguing with one another as they go out the door.

This ability to think critically and communicate effectively also is highly valued in the business world. If one were to ask the chief executive officer for any American business what was important, he or she would most likely say that it goes beyond the degree. In its position paper on student learning, the Business-Higher Education Forum surveyed its business and higher education members and found that they are looking for a “combination of skills and knowledge, including proficiency in leadership, teamwork, problem solving, analytical, critical thinking, communication, and writing skills.”<sup>3</sup>

Why be able to argue passionately and effectively? Bill Scheuerman, president of United University Professions in New York, emphasized the importance of critical thinking because it trains people to see the potential in the world, and helps them make the world a better place.

### **Success in offering diverse educational opportunities**

One surprise of the research is how many people identified an exposure to the liberal arts as a basic component of educational success. This identification was expressed not just in traditional liberal arts institutions, but also in two-year community colleges. A liberal arts education, with its broad palette of disciplines and emphasis on opening minds to new ways of thinking, rather than restricting them to facts, figures and technical skills, is one of the most cherished values among the faculty members and administrators, as well as the many policymakers and legislators, with whom we spoke, and among others who voice their opinions in public discourse on education. It enables students to have the flexibility they'll need upon graduation, when they encounter myriad challenges and interact with a polymorphous population outside the doors of academia. It allows them to exercise their brains so they are prepared for a thoughtful, productive life.

Conversely, says Chris Goff, a member of the Graduate Teaching Fellows Federation of the University of Oregon, "A lot of emphasis is placed on providing students with 'skills' that are essential for the workforce. I see this to be more training than education." Goff, who is completing his dissertation in sociology, suggests such a standard reduces students to "nothing more than workers who will be cogs in some particular branch of industry." It would be better to emphasize critical thinking, and watch as economic skills follow. Combining liberal arts with critical thinking in this way ensures, he says, that students will "not only contribute to the workforce, but will become leaders within it."

And a liberal arts education is not the exclusive territory of four-year institutions. Our interviewees felt it should be part of the community college experience as well. Students may be earning more technical degrees, but they constantly will be thrust into situations where they'll need an ability to learn and to learn quickly. "A good college education provides students with the skills and curiosity to navigate and explore," says John Thelin, a professor of history at the University of Kentucky.

Students value that exploration and want to make their own choices about what directions to take. Stephanie Gross, who just graduated from SUNY-Oneonta, relished the myriad opportunities at her school. “We are very fortunate to have a very large system of schools, so there really are any and all opportunities available,” she says. “Students can broaden their horizons in their majors and outside their majors and take more than one major, and really develop so many different skills.” Gross, who completed two majors and a concentration in a minor, was also the student representative to the SUNY board of trustees for two years. Having ownership over her education, she was able to add this political experience to her college years.

For Tina Collins, a research assistant at the University of Pennsylvania, that kind of off-campus opportunity is essential. She defines success as a balance of academic research—in this case in history and education—and the ability to communicate and apply that research outside of academia. At Penn, graduate students involved in outside activities are encouraged and, says Collins, “that’s beneficial for the university as a whole, because it trains people to communicate to a broader audience the work they do in their fields.”

### **Producing graduates who, in turn, enjoy success in their careers**

We constantly see for ourselves the economic benefits of higher education. According to the U.S. Census Bureau, in 2003 the average full-time worker with a bachelor’s degree earned \$49,900, 62 percent more than the \$30,800 earned by a worker with only a high school diploma. The correlation between higher level of education and higher earnings is seen amongst all racial/ethnic groups and for both men and women. Any college experience produces some sort of financial benefit when compared with none, but the financial gap between high school graduates and college graduates is increasing.

Some of the students we interviewed, like Itiah Thomas, are clearly focused on the economic benefits of education. A rising junior at Brown University, she plans to use the school’s prestigious name to her advantage and sees part of the university’s success as propelling her into a fruitful career. She is already working as a peer career counselor to build up contacts among the advisors.

Indeed, as Joshua Smith says, one must first “get the wrinkles out of the belly” and be sure one can put food on the table before addressing the more existential

benefits of education. Productive participation in the marketplace is an undeniable element in creating a holistic success. The education offered in college may enhance this, in Smith's view, by including hands-on experience, such as internships and service learning, and integrating liberal arts with application, giving theory a chance to come to life in real world situations.

Flexibility is another essential element of success and is closely linked to analytic thought: The ability to think through any given situation successfully, not just situations closely related to one's field of study, is undeniably necessary in today's economy. Educators and policymakers clearly value the concept of "learning how to learn," and instilling in students a willingness, even an eagerness, to explore new ideas. Conversely, a technical education that is too specific to a chosen area of study can be limiting in a dynamic world that often presents and may even require changes in careers. Students need to be prepared for change.

John Austin uses an analogy to illustrate this point: the old career ladder has been knocked down, he says. Instead, universities must equip students for rock climbing, in a world with no career ladders—equip them for a fast-changing environment, equip them to organize information efficiently—so they can find a nonlinear path when necessary to get to where they want to go or possibly to discover a destination they hadn't even considered.

Many who are deeply involved in educational research are convinced that, rather than being in competition with one another in a mutually exclusive stance, liberal arts and career success are complementary. "We want people who are economically self-sufficient," says George Kuh (NSSE). Graduates, he says, must have "skills and competencies that allow them to work productively." That involves gaining knowledge in their field of study—but remembering that the half-life of such knowledge will only sustain them for a short time beyond college. Graduates therefore also need "aptitudes or habits of the mind and heart to allow them to obtain new skills and competencies." They must be able to manipulate numbers and symbols, but also know how to work with others in a meaningful way, particularly with those from different backgrounds. Brian Fitzgerald, executive director of the Business-Higher Education Forum, counts teamwork as crucial for college graduates, and a skill they need to practice in school. "That's what life in organization is about today," he says. "It's dealing

with very complex problems and solving them in teams.”

### **Success in instilling an ability to live in a heterogeneous world**

Students need to be able to negotiate a heterogeneous world. Successful institutions must produce students who “work and function as effective, informed citizens in an increasingly diverse society,” says Jeff Milem, in the Department of Education Policy and Leadership at the University of Maryland. “It’s a matter of institutional liability. If you look at who the students are going to be, it’s increasingly students of color and students who have been underserved.”

For many students, the university experience is the first opportunity they have to face a diverse environment. “That’s an incredibly important way to define success,” says Milem. If students learn to move in a diverse community at college, they will take that skill with them when they leave and live in a world much broader than the ethnically, racially, ideologically limited one they may have come from. In such an expanded world, they will encounter more opportunities for their own success. And, as they move in increasingly broader circles, they themselves expand the reach of higher education to new populations.

How can universities accomplish this, according to Milem? Through good pedagogy, in chemistry class as well as sociology class. By bringing diverse opinions into the classroom discussion.

### **Success in enhancing civic engagement**

Civic engagement was emphasized repeatedly in our interviews, both in terms of ensuring that institutions provide broad access to the educational experience and in terms of ensuring that college graduates develop a sense of responsibility to society.

In a successful graduate, the practicality of finding a job is balanced by responsibility to society. Noting the trend among state and federal agencies to measure only easily quantifiable outcomes, such as job status and earnings, Sandy Astin suggests focusing on more important, if less tangible, results. “With simplistic measures like earnings we ignore what are, from a societal point of view, far more important qualities such as social and civic responsibility, tolerance, generosity, honesty, promise-keeping, leadership, parenting, citizenship and so on,” he says.

Carrying a sense of community and engagement away from college is the truest measure of success among many of the students that sociology professor James Earl Davis has encountered. Davis has found that, particularly among low-income and some racial and ethnic minority students, success after graduation means not just a financially successful career. It means students going back to their communities and participating vigorously in civic life. In this population, there is a greater sense, he says, of the old adage, "Where much is given, much is required." You don't go to Harvard to get a good job, he says; you go to bring back something of that experience. Access to elite institutions, for populations newer to the higher ed milieu, is crucial to feeding this trend—because the kind of institution a student attends increases the social capital he or she is able to bring home.

There are myriad ways to encourage civic responsibility and action: out-of-class experiences, including participation in sports, newspapers, student government and drama were among those most frequently cited as successful. Service learning was another—"at least part of their existence [should] be devoted to something beyond themselves," says Reginald Robinson. Involvement in the community beyond campus, and interaction among diverse groups on and off campus, are key. Professors should be rewarded for engaging in their broader communities, for providing public forums for thorny community issues.

Mark Soskin, an economics professor at the University of Central Florida, addressed water problems with the town's aquifer by bringing opposing viewpoints together on campus. "Citizens aren't born, they're made," says George Dennison, the president of the University of Montana. He belongs to the National Campus Compact, an organization of more than 950 college and university presidents committed to providing opportunities for students to become involved in their communities. At the same time, Dennison feels responsible for supporting the state economy, to some degree, by being cognizant of its specific needs. Montana has two-year vocational programs in its college of technology, geared toward workforce development as well as providing for an educated citizenry.

Out-of-class activities are called a rich "smorgasbord" and a "miraculous kingdom" of opportunity. While assignments and exams may build knowledge, these elements of a college education build character. "Intellect without values and character has declining appeal to me," explains history professor John Thelin.



He and many others recommend giving students opportunities to interact with people they might not otherwise come into contact with, encouraging them to work together toward a common goal.

And don't think civic engagement must stand apart from economic success. "Some people," says George Kuh, "want to put civic engagement and economic productivity at odds." They think that somehow because civic engagement is "purer," moving too close to economic activities will somehow compromise the university. While that does happen, there are ways to maintain distance from economic engines and influences, ways to provide economic success but also instill civic engagement in graduates. It's a matter of balance, and emphasis.

John Austin talks about success in higher ed being a "three-fer": (1) teaching individuals skills and competencies that help them participate in the economy; (2) cultivating a broad approach to thinking about and adjusting to the opportunities that arise or can be created; and (3) helping students understand their role in civic, community, social and political life.

"I think institutions need to assume some responsibility for all such outcomes," says Sandy Astin, considering the civic elements in education. "I personally feel that it would be in [the states'] interest to be equally focused on citizenship, civic responsibility, tolerance, leadership and self-understanding, given that many of our most severe state problems are closely connected to such qualities."

Add ethics to that list, says Brian Fitzgerald, at the Business-Higher Education Forum, where ongoing initiatives work to build a sense of ethics in a future corporate America. "A successful institution has a demonstrable impact on the community," says Rich Novak, at the Center for Public Trusteeship and Governance. That means not just students, but faculty, administrators and trustees must build bridges and address local and state challenges, beyond their campus gates. He especially would favor further "greening" on campuses to support a more environmentally sustainable future. "We want universities to be leaders of society in terms of how they do things as well as the students they produce."

## **Goals and Realities**

While our interviewees were largely in agreement about the principles of success, some of them expressed concern that higher education is moving away

from these principles, toward a market model that values training above education, buildings over scholarship, earners instead of learners. Bill Scheuerman points out the danger when universities and colleges begin to behave like businesses with profit, instead of education, at their core. “We’re pursuing criteria that belong in the private sector, where the goal might be to save dollars,” he warns. “Education might become secondary.” Education leaders are so worried about doing more with less, their goal becomes finding how to educate “on the cheap.”

“That’s a mistake. . . . The purpose of an education is to open your mind, expose you to new ideas, and get students to grow and change intellectually,” says Scheuerman.

Lara Couturier points this out most effectively in the Futures Report, released in 2005. Universities and colleges, she argues, pay too much attention to—and spend way too much money on—flashy buildings and programs designed not so much to educate as to draw more students and more tuition money in from a competitive field. Schools are paying for things like kayaking pools, with built-in whitewater, and multimillion dollar recreation centers. “We don’t compete over ‘Hey, this college graduates 98 percent of our low-income students,’” she says. Administrators rarely direct donors away from new stadiums and toward need-based scholarships.

Even less extravagant improvements should be considered carefully. Remember, says John Thelin, bricks and mortar are “at best a stage for the educational drama. Preoccupation with creating, extending and maintaining a massive campus can draw attention away from more essential features.”

While colleges and universities may get wrapped up in their own world of academia, it is important to remember that they serve individuals—and the public at large. Thelin harks back to the first colleges in the U.S., with their “noble” statements of purpose. Their aim was to groom privileged youth to contribute to civil life. Thelin suggests that today institutions should begin to move away from higher education for individual gain, and move back toward higher education as a “social good.”

“Lots of students are going to college so they can make a lot of money,” says Joshua Smith. “What I would like to see . . . is that they emerge with the idea that even if they make a lot of money, they still have an obligation as citizens to other people in the society in which they live.”

The same can be applied to the institutions themselves. “When you work for the common good,” says Smith, “quite frankly, all the boats float.”

## **Conclusions**

We began our interviews with a few working ideas about what counts most in evaluating success. What should we be looking for in a successful institution? Our informal survey sustained these initial premises, which were:

### **For Students**

- The ability to think analytically, and to present reasoned, clear arguments about complex issues, using logic and creativity.
- Preparation for a productive life as a technical, intellectual or artistic worker.
- Exposure to intellectual traditions and high-quality work in humanities, sciences and social sciences.

### **For Society**

- Creating a knowledge base that would support a strong and diverse economy—in other words, that would meet the community’s economic needs, fill the jobs that need filling, and support public institutions with research and problem-solving opportunities.
- Creating a robust culture through art, providing a showplace and forum for cultural endeavors.
- Creating a more democratic, ethical and just society by providing educational opportunities for all and by promoting mutual understanding among students and the community at large.

While the survey sustained these initial thoughts, we have reported that other issues surfaced as well. Most notably, our sampling of interviews placed great value on *civic engagement* as an indicator of success, both for institutions and for individuals.

Similarly, *inclusion* was seen as an important factor. Not only must colleges involve all kinds of students, regardless of race, ethnicity and socioeconomic background, by accepting them to their institutions, but colleges also must work with students to keep them on campus until they graduate. This was closely tied to concern about maintaining a *pluralistic environment* as a marker of success. Universities are the places where students and scholars of all backgrounds can encounter variant and diverse ideas, learning from one another.

Emphasis on *liberal arts* also came to the fore. Students must be educated not only to think for themselves but also to use the broad knowledge afforded by a liberal arts education to engage effectively in a dynamic and ever-changing world.

All of this suggests that policymakers should not start addressing accountability with an unexamined assumption that colleges and universities need “more.” Instead, policymakers should develop a clear understanding about what constitutes institutional success and then examine both new and existing accountability measures in light of this concept of success. New accountability measures should be considered only when it is apparent that they would add data important to achieving success and would not duplicate or harm existing measures. By tailoring our measures of accountability to our definitions of success, we can have a system of higher education whose internal procedures further its missions.

## ENDNOTES

<sup>1</sup> The following individuals were interviewed by the author for this article:

Alexander W. Astin: Allan Murray Cartter Professor, Graduate School of Education and Information Studies, UCLA; Director, Higher Education Research Institute.

John C. Austin: Vice President, Michigan Department of Education; Nonresident Senior Fellow, Brookings Institution; Senior Fellow, University of Michigan School of Education—Center for the Study of Higher and Postsecondary Education (National Forum on Higher Education for the Public Good).

Roger Benjamin: Rand Corporation’s Council for Aid to Education.

Roger Bowen: General Secretary, American Association of University Professors.

Tina Collins: Research Assistant, University of Pennsylvania; Political Director, Graduate Employees Together University of Pennsylvania/American Federation of Teachers.

Lara K. Couturier: Higher Education Policy Consultant / Former Interim Principal Investigator, Associate Director and Director of Research, Futures Project: Policy for Higher Education in a Changing World.

James Earl Davis: Temple University Education Leadership and Policy Studies

George Dennison: President of the University of Montana.

Brian Fitzgerald: Executive Director, Business-Higher Education Forum.

George D. Kuh: Chancellor's Professor of Higher Education and Director, Center for Post-secondary Research, Indiana University Bloomington School of Education.

Christopher Goff: Women's Studies Department Steward, Graduate Teaching Fellows Federation, University of Oregon.

Stephanie Gross: student member of the State University of New York Board of Trustees.

Adam Mangana: recent graduate of Brown University.

Steve March: State Representative from Oregon (D-District 46).

Jeffrey F. Milem: Associate Director and Graduate Program Director for the Higher Education Administration Program, Department of Education Policy and Leadership at the University of Maryland.

Rich Novak: Executive Director, Center for Public Trusteeship and Governance, Association of Governing Boards.

Robert O'Leary: State Senator from Massachusetts (D-Cape and Islands District); Chair, Higher Education Committee.

Reginald Robinson: President and CEO of the Kansas Board of Regents.

John R. Thelin: University of Kentucky Educational Policy Department.

William E. Scheuerman: United University Professions, SUNY president and chair of the AFT's Higher Education Program and Policy Council.

Joshua L. Smith: Emeritus Professor of Higher Education at the School of Education, New York University and former president of the Borough of Manhattan Community College.

Mark D. Soskin: Associate Professor, University of Central Florida Department of Economics.

Itiah Thomas: current student at Brown University.

<sup>2</sup> Alexander W. Astin, *Achieving Academic Excellence* (Jossey-Bass Inc Pub, April 1985).

<sup>3</sup> The Business-Higher Education Forum, "Public Accountability for Student Learning in Higher Education: Issues and Options" (Washington, D.C.: The Business-Higher Education Forum, April 2004): 10.

# The Investment Payoff: A 50-State Analysis of the Public and Private Benefits of Higher Education<sup>1</sup>

BY SARAH KRICHELS GOAN AND ALISA F. CUNNINGHAM

*Sarah Krichels Goan and Alisa F. Cunningham explore the empirical evidence of higher education success. Drawing on a report issued by the Institute for Higher Education Policy, Goan and Cunningham present data on a variety of private and public benefits of higher education.*

—Editors' note

It is widely held that investing in higher education can bring significant benefits to both individuals and society as a whole. Both in the United States and abroad, many studies have articulated the benefits of higher education by showing that an educated workforce increases productivity along with individuals' ability to sustain employment and earn higher income.<sup>2</sup> Subsequently, the nation sees a return in the form of a higher tax base and an increased demand for goods and services. In addition, an educated workforce with a lower unemployment rate diminishes the demand for government-provided social services.

Like the federal government, state governments make a sizeable and vital public investment in postsecondary education, with annual state appropriations in fiscal year 2005 ranging from \$79 million in Vermont (which traditionally has low appropriations) to \$9 billion in California.<sup>3</sup> Support for postsecondary education has return benefits for both state and local governments and citizens living there. At the state level, the benefits of higher education are becoming increasingly relevant as policymakers seek to better understand how the investment of state tax dollars in higher education pays off.

In 1998 the Institute for Higher Education Policy published *Reaping the Benefits: Defining the Public and Private Value of Going to College*. The report contained a simple matrix that identified the benefits of higher education and grouped them

into four major categories: public economic benefits, private economic benefits, public social benefits, and private social benefits.<sup>4</sup> Drawing on the conclusions of the 1998 report and using recent data obtained from the U.S. Census Bureau's Current Population Survey (CPS),<sup>5</sup> this analysis selected six quantifiable indicators from the benefits matrix that could be examined for each of the 50 states:<sup>6</sup>

- Private economic benefits: higher personal income and lower unemployment;
- Public economic benefits: decreased reliance on public assistance;
- Private social benefits: better health;
- Public social benefits: increased volunteerism and increased voting participation.

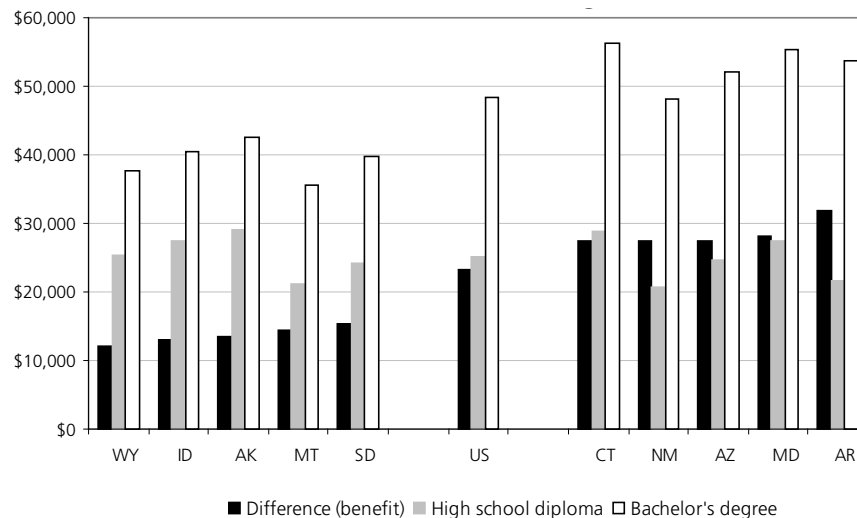
The key measure for each indicator is the added benefit, either to the individual or to society as a whole, from obtaining either an associate's degree or a bachelor's degree in addition to a high school diploma.<sup>7</sup> For each indicator, the added benefit can be measured by examining the difference (in either dollar amounts or percentage points) between the outcomes reported among those with a degree compared to the outcomes reported among those with a high school diploma. Further, when examining the difference, it is important to consider the starting point (percent or average dollar amount among those with a high school diploma) in order to conceptualize the relative difference among the groups; to this end, the percentage difference was often calculated.<sup>8</sup> This was particularly useful when examining small percentage point changes.

As context for this discussion about the state-level benefits of higher education, it is important to first examine the percentage of the population holding an associate's degree or bachelor's degree and higher. Nationally, 28 percent of the population age 25 years and older held a bachelor's degree or higher, and 36 percent held an associate's degree or higher. Among the 50 states, the percentage of the population holding a bachelor's degree in March 2004 ranged from 15 percent in West Virginia to 37 percent in Massachusetts. When the attainment data are combined with each of the six indicators, significant trends unfold. While the main text focuses on the added benefit of obtaining a bachelor's degree, the analysis presented in Box 1-1 suggests that similar trends hold true among those who hold an associate's degree.

## Private Economic Benefits: Personal Income

Data show that in terms of both lifetime earnings and average annual income, individuals' ability to earn more and to maintain employment correlates with their higher levels of education. In March 2004, the national average personal total income of workers 25 and older with a bachelor's degree was \$48,417, roughly \$23,000 higher than for those with a high school diploma (Figure 1). At the state level, the financial impact varied although the increase in earnings for those holding a bachelor's degree was clearly evident across all the states. While those with a bachelor's degree in Connecticut reported the highest overall average personal total income (\$56,000), Arkansas stood out as the state in which the difference between those holding a high school diploma and those with a bachelor's degree was the highest (almost \$32,000).

**FIGURE 1: Average personal total income of the U.S. population age 25 and older as of March 2004: states with the largest and smallest differences between those with a high school diploma and those with a bachelor's degree.**



NOTES: States selected based on the difference; earnings by educational attainment are included for comparison purposes. Those with a bachelor's degree means that the highest level attained was a bachelor's degree and does not include those who have attained an advanced degree as well.

SOURCE: U.S. Census Bureau, Current Population Survey (CPS), March Supplement (2004).

Even in states where the added benefit of a bachelor's degree was the lowest in terms of increases to average personal income, the data still show dramatic per-

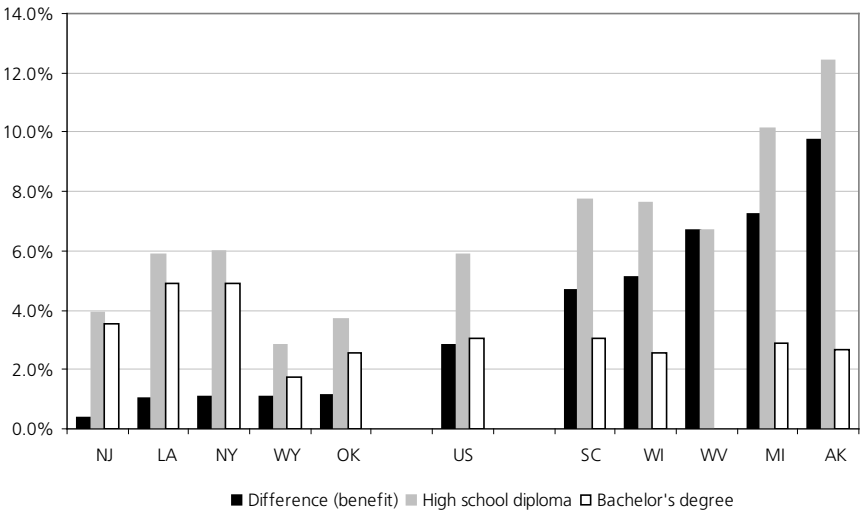


centage increases. For example, in the state of Montana those with a bachelor's degree reported average personal total earnings of \$35,000, the lowest in the nation. However, this was \$14,500 higher than the average total personal income of Montana workers with only a high school diploma, an increase of 48 percent.

**Private Economic Benefits: Labor and Unemployment**

The percentage of workers age 25 and older who are in the labor force but were not employed is another personal economic indicator that can be correlated with higher educational attainment at both the national and state levels. Unlike the previous example, where the benefit of higher education was increased income, the benefit in the case of unemployment is a decrease in the reported rate among those who have completed a bachelor's degree. In March 2004, 6 percent of the U.S. population age 25 and older with a high school diploma were not employed, compared with 3 percent for those with a bachelor's degree (Figure 2). At the state level, people with a high school diploma in the labor force

**FIGURE 2: Percentage of U.S. population age 25 and older who were in the labor force and not employed, March 2004: states with the largest and smallest differences between those with a high school diploma and those with a bachelor's degree.**



NOTES: States selected based on the difference; unemployment rates by educational attainment are included for comparison purposes. Those with a bachelor's degree means that the highest level attained was a bachelor's degree and does not include those who have attained an advanced degree as well.

SOURCE: U.S. Census Bureau, Current Population Survey (CPS), March Supplement (2004).

reported being unemployed at a higher rate, with the difference between the two populations ranging from roughly 0.4 percentage points to 10 percentage points. Across all the states, individuals with a bachelor's degree reported lower levels of unemployment than individuals with a high school diploma.

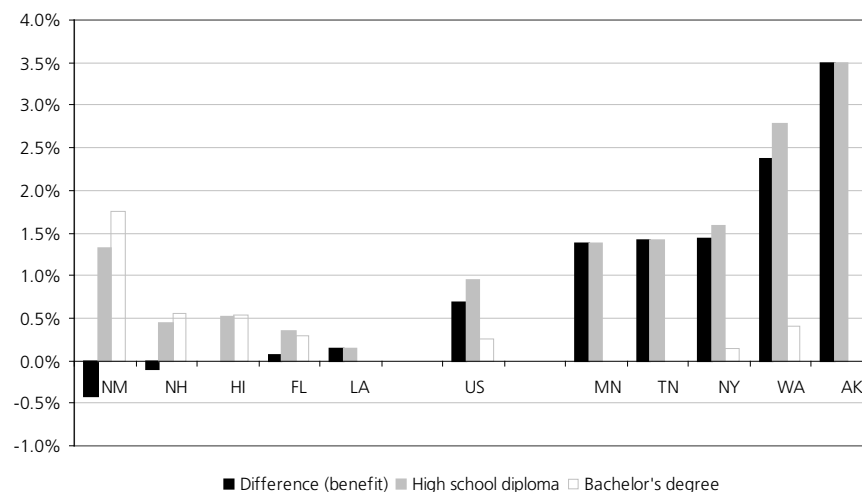
Because in many cases the changes in unemployment rates are relatively small, the differences between those who hold a high school diploma and those who hold a bachelor's degree are captured more clearly by examining the percentage difference. In the United States as a whole, the 2.8 percentage point difference between the unemployment rates of those with a high school diploma and those with a bachelor's degree constituted a 48 percent decrease. Even in the five states where the differences in unemployment rates between the two populations were smallest, they represented decreases of 10 percent to 39 percent. Despite the range of differences, therefore, the pattern is consistent: higher unemployment rates were found among those with a high school diploma than among those with a bachelor's degree.

### **Public Economic Benefits: Reduced Reliance on Public Assistance**

An educated workforce with a lower unemployment rate also may bring other benefits, such as less dependence on welfare assistance and diminished demand for other government-provided social services.<sup>9</sup> Like unemployment, therefore, the benefit from higher education is actually a decrease in the reported rate of public assistance receipt. Nationally, 1 percent of those with a high school diploma, and less than 0.5 percent of those with a bachelor's degree, received some form of public assistance in 2003 (Figure 3).<sup>10</sup> Among the states, decreases in the rate of public assistance receipt ranged from 0.2 percentage points to 3.5 percentage points. Three states—New Mexico, New Hampshire and Hawaii—showed that a greater proportion of those with a bachelor's degree reported receiving public assistance. However, the data from the other 47 states reinforce the assertion that earning a bachelor's degree reduces reliance on public assistance programs.

While the national percentages regarding the receipt of public assistance in 2003 were quite small, a difference of 0.7 percentage points between the rate of receipt reported by those with a high school diploma and the rate reported by those with a bachelor's degree represented a decrease of 72 percent. Among

**FIGURE 3: Percent of U.S. population age 25 and older who reported receiving public assistance in 2003, March 2004: states with the largest and smallest differences between those with a high school diploma and those with a bachelor's degree.**



NOTES: States selected based on the difference; rates of public assistance receipt by educational attainment are included for comparison purposes. Those with a bachelor's degree means that the highest level attained was a bachelor's degree and does not include those who have attained an advanced degree as well. In Mississippi, no one with a high school diploma or a bachelor's degree reported receiving public assistance; the state was therefore excluded from this table.

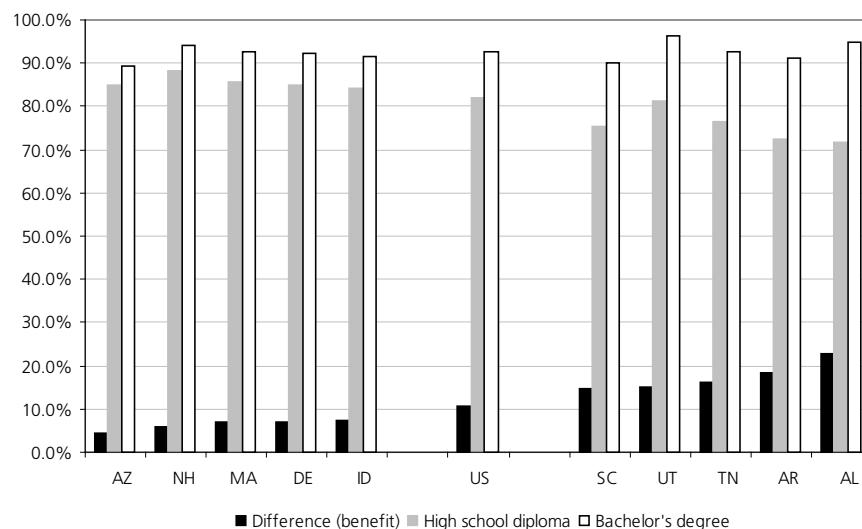
Source: U.S. Census Bureau, Current Population Survey (CPS), March Supplement (2004).

those states in which data revealed a decrease in the rate of public assistance receipt between those with a high school degree and those with a bachelor's degree, 27 showed a decrease of 100 percent (four are included in Figure 3). Decreases in the rate of public assistance receipt in the remaining 20 states ranged from 14 percent to 91 percent.

### Private Social Benefits: Health

While most indicators of private social benefits are extremely difficult to measure, personal health represents one that is quantifiable. Across the United States, 82 percent of those with a high school diploma reported being in "excellent, very good, or good" health, compared with 93 percent of those with a bachelor's degree (Figure 4). Indeed, in every state, those with a bachelor's degree reported higher rates of good health than those with a high school diploma. The greatest differences in the reporting of good health between those

**FIGURE 4: Percent of U.S. population age 25 or older who reported being in good, very good, or excellent health, March 2004: states with the largest and smallest differences between those with a high school diploma and those with a bachelor's degree.**



NOTES: States selected based on the difference; rates of reported health by educational attainment are included for comparison purposes. Those with a bachelor's degree means that the highest level attained was a bachelor's degree and does not include those who have attained an advanced degree as well.

Source: U.S. Census Bureau, Current Population Survey (CPS), March Supplement (2004).

with a high school diploma and those with a bachelor's degree ranged from 15 percentage points to 23 percentage points and represented increases of 19 percent to 32 percent. For example, in Alabama (the state with the lowest reported rate of good health among those with a high school diploma) the proportion of bachelor's degree recipients indicating "excellent, very good or good health" was 23 percentage points higher than for those with high school diplomas, a difference of 32 percent. Even in the states where the data show the smallest differences among the two populations, the percentage differences in reported good health between high school graduates and bachelor's degree recipients constituted increases of between 5 percent and 9 percent.

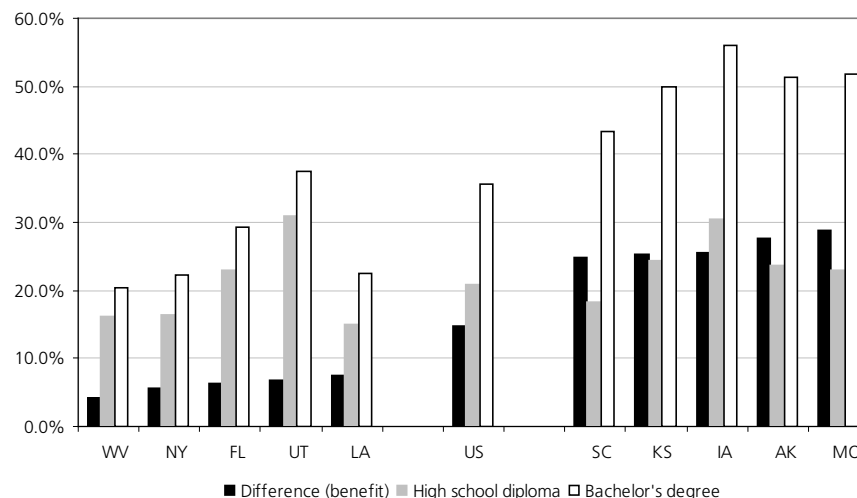
### Public Social Benefits: Volunteerism

The public social benefits of higher education are probably the most complex and difficult to measure. However, community engagement can be captured

to some degree by examining the rate of volunteer participation. In September 2004, 21 percent of the U.S. population age 25 and older who had a high school diploma reported ever volunteering, compared with 36 percent of those with a bachelor's degree, a difference of almost 15 percentage points (Figure 5). In all 50 states, higher levels of education were correlated to a higher likelihood that an individual would volunteer, with differences ranging from 4 percentage points to 29 percentage points. Even states with low rates of overall volunteerism revealed added benefits that correlated with higher levels of educational attainment. For example, in West Virginia 20 percent of bachelor's degree recipients reported ever volunteering, compared with 16 percent of those with a high school diploma.

As with other indicators, the data suggest that the added value of a bachelor's degree in terms of the percentage increase in volunteering rates varies from one state to another. While West Virginia showed the smallest difference between

**FIGURE 5: Percentage of U.S. population age 25 and older who reported ever volunteering, September 2004: states with the largest and smallest differences between those with a high school diploma and those with a bachelor's degree.**



NOTES: States selected based on the difference; rates of reported volunteerism by educational attainment are included for comparison purposes. Those with a bachelor's degree means that the highest level attained was a bachelor's degree and does not include those who have attained an advanced degree as well.

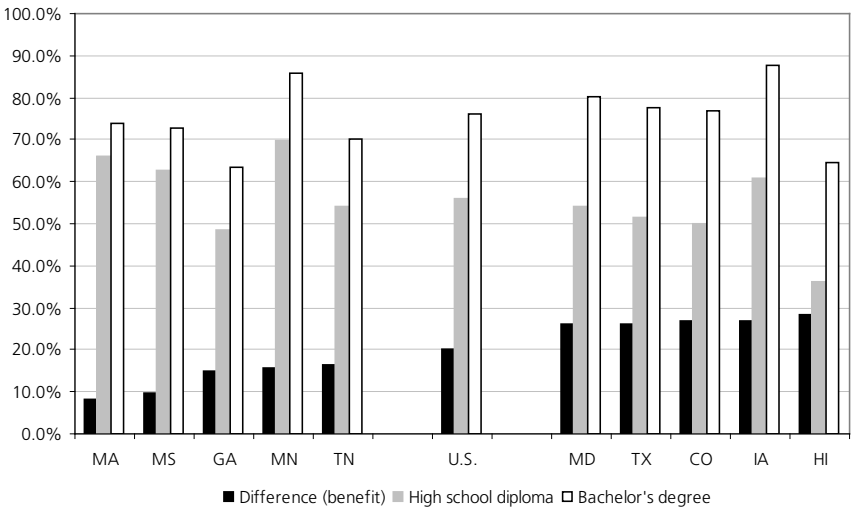
SOURCE: U.S. Census Bureau, Current Population Survey (CPS), Volunteer Supplement (September 2004).

the two populations, this represented an increase of 22 percent in the volunteerism rate. Similarly, in the other four states where small differences between the two populations were reported (5 percentage points to 7 percentage points), the differences represented increases of 35 percent to 80 percent. This indicates that higher education still correlated with additional benefits even in those states.

**Public Social Benefits: Voting**

Voting rate as a proxy for civic involvement is another indicator that can gauge the public social benefits of higher education. In November 2000, 56 percent of U.S. citizens who were age 25 and older and had a high school diploma responded that they had voted in the presidential election, compared with 76 percent of bachelor's degree recipients, a difference of 20 percentage points (Figure 6). All of the states also showed evidence that higher educational attainment increases the likelihood of voting. The differences in reported voting rates between those with a high school diploma and those with a bachelor's degree ranged from 8

**FIGURE 6: Percentage of the U.S. population age 25 and older who voted in the November 2000 election: states with the largest and smallest differences between those with a high school diploma and those with a bachelor's degree.**



NOTES: States selected based on the difference; reported voting rates by educational attainment are included for comparison purposes. Those with bachelor's degrees does not include those who have an advanced degree as well as a bachelor's degree.

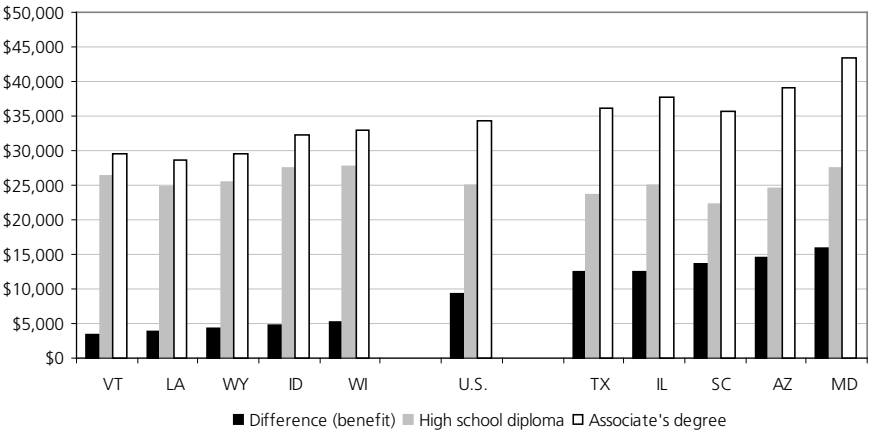
SOURCE: U.S. Census Bureau, Current Population Survey (CPS), Voting Supplement (November 2000).

percentage points in Massachusetts to 28 percentage points in Hawaii. Even the states with the smallest differences in voting rates between the two populations demonstrated significant percentage increases, ranging from 15 percent to 30 percent. This indicates that all states benefited from higher education with respect to voting participation.

**A CLOSER LOOK:**  
**The Value Added from Attaining an Associate’s Degree**

The proportion of the population age 25 and older who held an associate’s degree ranged from 5 percent in Louisiana to 14 percent in North Dakota. At the state level, the additional benefit of an associate’s degree was clear in half the indicators, while for the others the outcome was mixed. For example, for those with an associate’s degree the national average personal total income was about \$34,000, or roughly \$9,000 more than for those with a high school diploma (Figure B-1). At the state level, the increase in earnings for those holding an associ-

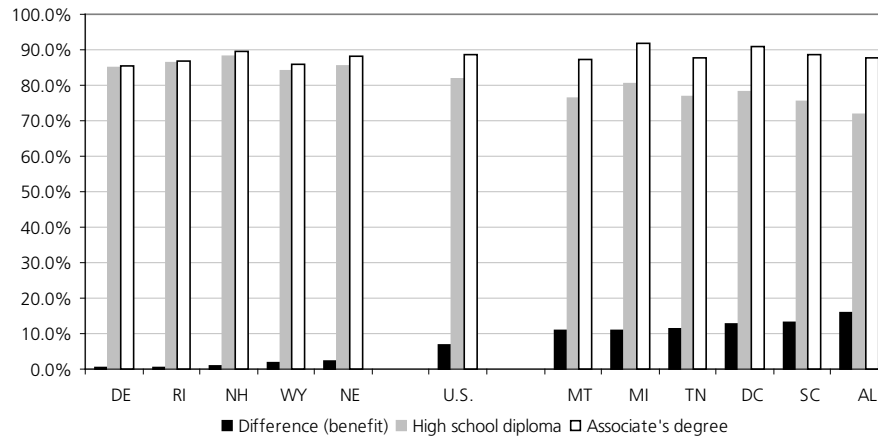
**FIGURE B-1: Average personal total income of the U.S. population age 25 and older as of March 2004: states with the largest and smallest differences between those with a high school diploma and those with an associate’s degree.**



NOTES: States selected based on the difference; earnings by educational attainment are included for comparison purposes.

Source: U.S. Census Bureau, Current Population Survey (CPS), March Supplement (2004).

**FIGURE B-2: Percent of U.S. population age 25 or older who reported being in good, very good, or excellent health: states with the largest and smallest differences between those with a high school diploma and those with an associate's degree.**



NOTES: States selected based on the difference; earnings by educational attainment are included for comparison purposes.

Source: U.S. Census Bureau, Current Population Survey (CPS), March Supplement (2004).

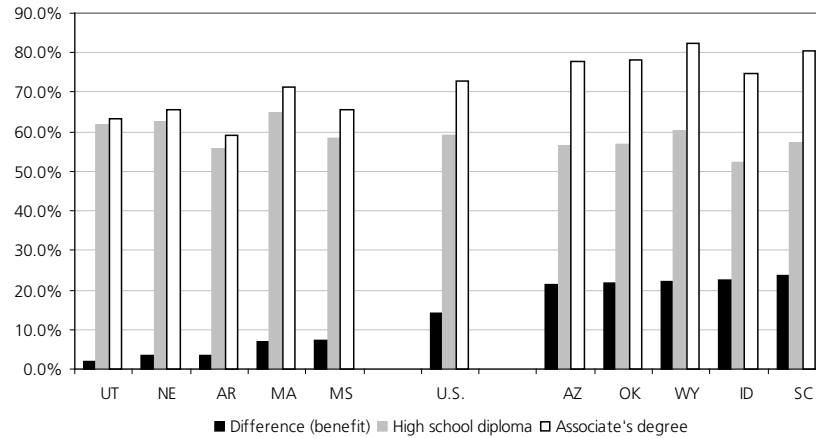
ate's degree was clearly evident across all the states and ranged from a difference of about \$3,300 per year in Vermont to almost \$16,000 in Maryland.

An associate's degree also correlated to higher levels of reported good health (Figure B-2). The rate of good health among those with an associate's degree in Alabama was 15 percentage points higher than among those with a high school diploma (an increase of 22 percent), although citizens of Delaware reported only minor differences in health status.

The most recent voting data from the November 2004 presidential election revealed that, in every state, a larger proportion of the population with an associate's degree reported voting than did the population with a high school diploma (Figure B-3). This ranged from a 3 percent increase in Utah to a 53 percent increase in Hawaii. Volunteerism rates showed similar patterns and all but two states indicated that a higher proportion of those with an associate's degree reported ever volunteering (Figure B-4).



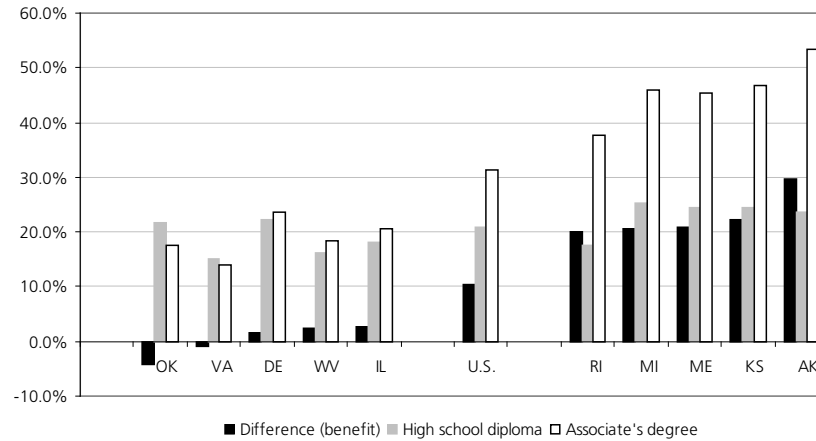
**FIGURE B-3: Percentage of the U.S. population age 25 and older who voted in the November 2004 election: states with the largest and smallest differences between those with a high school diploma and those with an associate's degree.**



NOTES: States selected based on the difference; reported voting rates by educational attainment are included for comparison purposes.

Source: U.S. Census Bureau, Current Population Survey (CPS), Voting Supplement (November 2004).

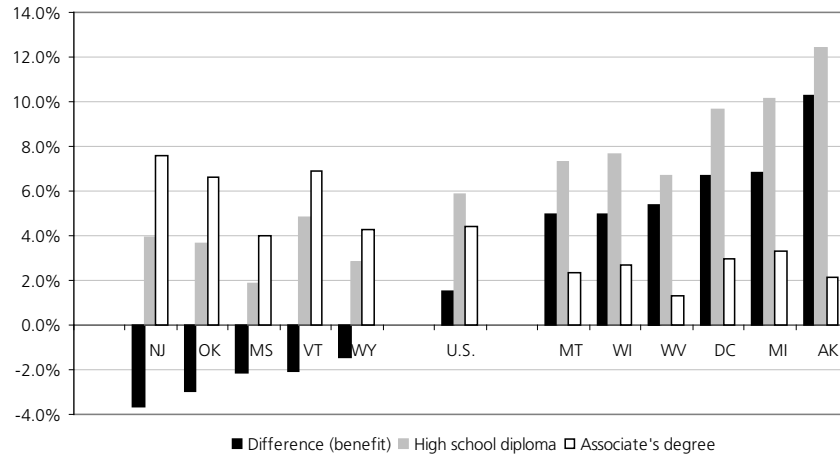
**FIGURE B-4: Percentage of U.S. population age 25 and older who reported ever volunteering, September 2004: states with the largest and smallest differences between those with a high school diploma and those with an associate's degree.**



NOTES: States selected based on the difference; rates of reported volunteerism by educational attainment are included for comparison purposes.

Source: U.S. Census Bureau, Current Population Survey (CPS), Volunteer Supplement (September 2004).

**FIGURE B-5: Percent of U.S. population age 25 and older who were in the labor force and not employed, March 2004: states with the largest and smallest differences between those with a high school diploma and those with an associate's degree.**



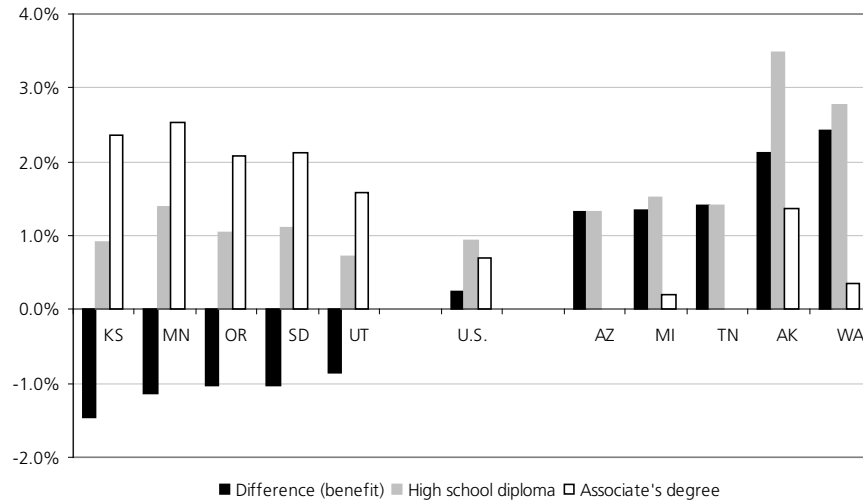
NOTES: States selected based on the difference; rates of unemployment by educational attainment are included for comparison purposes.

Source: U.S. Census Bureau, Current Population Survey (CPS), March Supplement (2004).

In the majority of states and in the nation overall, the rates of unemployment and public assistance receipt declined among those with an associate's degree (Figures B-5 and B-6). However, in nine states, the unemployment rate among those with an associate's degree was higher than among those with a high school diploma. Respondents with an associate's degree in 19 states reported higher rates of public assistance receipt than those with a high school diploma. These higher rates among those with an associate's degree ought to be examined in more depth on a state-by-state basis so that the research can consider specific unemployment policies or welfare requirements unique to each state.<sup>11</sup>

In sum, every state shows increased benefits for those with an associate's degree in terms of income, good health and voting when compared with those with a high school diploma. Furthermore, every state benefited from at least two of the remaining three indicators. While the specific benefits that accrue to those who attain an associate's degree vary across the states, data nonetheless indicate that a two-year degree correlates to increased well-being at the state level.

**FIGURE B-6: Percent of U.S. population age 25 and older who reported receiving public assistance in 2003, March 2004: states with the largest and smallest differences between those with a high school diploma and those with an associate's degree.**



NOTES: States selected based on the difference; rates of public assistance receipt by educational attainment are included for comparison purposes. In Mississippi, no one with a high school diploma or an associate's degree reported receiving public assistance; the state was therefore excluded from this table.

Source: U.S. Census Bureau, Current Population Survey (CPS), March Supplement (2004).

## Conclusion and Policy Implications

Higher education provides a broad array of benefits to both individuals and society. The six indicators chosen for this analysis convincingly show that **almost every state benefits from higher education in every indicator**. For example, individuals who complete an associate's or bachelor's degree have higher salaries and lower unemployment rates compared with those with a high school diploma. Those with an associate's or bachelor's degree also are more likely to report better health, to vote and to volunteer than those with a high school diploma.

The simple articulation of the benefits of higher education for individual states needs to be featured more prominently in state policy debates regarding the

investment of state resources in higher education. However, at the state level the benefits of higher education are not fully understood and have not been adequately researched. To this end, the following recommendations can be drawn:

- To facilitate the discussion in the policy arena, efforts should be undertaken to develop specific and quantifiable indicators of the value of higher education in each state. This will also ensure that future data and analyses can take into account the policies and demographic trends unique to each state.
- In order to advance the public dialogue about higher education benefits, information should be readily available. States should consider implementing annual state-level reports that provide information about the value of higher education.

Additional research in this area can help answer questions such as why some states benefit more than others. Reframing the public dialogue over higher education to include all the benefits that accrue to a state also could be used by state policymakers to encourage residents to support and take advantage of postsecondary educational opportunities. An expanded understanding of the payoffs that result from the public and private expenditures in higher education could go a long way toward improving the prospects for state economic development, social stability and individual prosperity.

## ENDNOTES

<sup>1</sup> This article is based on the Institute for Higher Education Policy's report of the same name, available online at [www.ihep.org](http://www.ihep.org).

<sup>2</sup> The organizations and reports include, but are not limited to: National Forum on Higher Education and the Public Good, the American Association of Colleges and Universities, the College Board's *Education Pays* (College Board, 2004), the National Center for Public Policy and Higher Education's *Measuring Up* (2004), and the Institute for Higher Education Policy's, *The Investment Payoff: A 50-State Analysis of the Public and Private Benefits of Higher Education* (2005).

<sup>3</sup> Center for the Study of Education Policy, "Grapevine 50-State Summary Table: Appropriations of State Tax Funds for Operating Expenses of Higher Education in the 50 States for Fiscal Years 1995, 2000, 2003, 2004, and 2005, with Percentages of Change Over the Most Recent One, Two, Five, and Ten Years. (In \$1,000s)" (Normal, Ill.: Center for the Study of Education Policy, Illinois State University, 2005. Available online at <http://www.coe.ilstu.edu/grapevine/50state.htm>.

<sup>4</sup> The matrix can be found in the full version of the 50-State publication as well as the origi-

nal report, both available online at [www.ihep.org](http://www.ihep.org).

<sup>5</sup> Specifically, data from the March 2004 Supplement, the September 2004 Volunteer Supplement, and the November 2000 Voting Supplement. For more information on the Current Population Survey and its supplements, see “Current Population Survey, Technical Paper 63RV: Design And Methodology” available at <http://www.bls.census.gov/cps/tp/tp63.htm>.

<sup>6</sup> The District of Columbia is not included as part of the 50-state analysis. However, data for the city are included in the appendix tables of the original report, available online at [www.ihep.org](http://www.ihep.org).

<sup>7</sup> This study does not attempt to draw inferences regarding causal relationships or to question why some states might fare better or worse compared with other states.

<sup>8</sup> This is mathematically calculated as a percentage by dividing the difference by the findings for those with a high school diploma.

<sup>9</sup> The March Supplement of the Current Population Survey defines public assistance as welfare payments, general assistance program payments, emergency assistance payments, Cuban/Haitian refugee payments, and Indian assistance payments. It specifically does not include Food Stamps or Social Security Insurance payments.

<sup>10</sup> In Mississippi, no one with a high school diploma or a bachelor’s degree reported receiving public assistance and the state was therefore excluded from this comparison.

<sup>11</sup> In addition, welfare data is suspect since the CPS question asks if the respondent received aid in the previous year only; depending on state law, it is possible that many of those age 25 or older with a high school diploma already reached the five year maximum and therefore “timed out” of the public assistance system.

# Embracing Accountability

BY ROBERT T. MUNDHENK

*Some observers believe that “traditional” forms of higher education accountability are not sufficient to meet the 21st-century challenges facing colleges and universities. Robert Mundhenk argues that higher education needs to embrace new forms of accountability.*

—Editors’ note

**A**lthough the value of a college degree is a given for most Americans, rising costs and some legislative questioning have led more and more stakeholders to demand that higher education demonstrate it is worth the expenditure by students, parents and government agencies. These calls for accountability are becoming increasingly strident, partly because higher education has not been particularly responsive to requests for information on student and institutional success.

While the reluctance to engage in a conversation about accountability is understandable, it is also dangerous. The longer higher education avoids the accountability discussion, the more likely it is that the terms of the discussion, when it is held, will be out of higher education’s control. Higher education institutions are now compiling, as a part of their accreditation processes, information about students’ learning success, the most important indicator of quality to most stakeholders. They should seize the opportunity to make this assessment information as open and transparent to the public as possible. This will allay public concerns, but on terms that truly and appropriately indicate their success and worth.

## **The View from Outside**

In an article in the June 17, 2005, issue of *The Chronicle of Higher Education*, Rep. John A. Boehner (R-Ohio) argues against a national database of student information and for more information about the ways colleges spend their money:

What is sorely lacking in higher education today is not personal information on students, but useful information on taxpayer-financed colleges themselves. When choosing between College A, with an annual tuition of \$15,000, and College B, with an annual tuition of \$25,000, parents and students have far too little ability to ascertain whether the \$10,000 gap is primarily attributable to legitimate differences in academic quality or to the existence of frivolous student perks like rock-climbing walls, luxury dormitories, and giant wave pools . . . The real culprit is the education establishment's continuing reluctance to give the public a clear and accurate glimpse at how colleges spend their money. What's missing, by and large, is "sunshine."<sup>1</sup>

Moreover, as chairman of the House Education and the Workforce Committee, which drafts education bills such as the reauthorization of the Higher Education Act (HR 609), he exercises great influence over federal legislation.

The current version of the bill, passed in July 2005, authorizes the creation of a government list of federally funded institutions that "repeatedly engage in excessive tuition hikes" (defined as increases more than twice the rate of inflation over a three-year period). Colleges and universities on this list would be asked to "provide information to the public about the causes of tuition increases, as well as strategies that will be used to hold down tuition in the future." The bill also directs the Department of Education to create a database of "College Consumer Profiles" that will contain "valuable information such as the school's mission, student demographics, accreditation, student/faculty ratios, faculty qualifications, costs, student services, credit transfer policies, graduation rates, and placement rates."<sup>2</sup> [Like most effective politicians, Rep. Boehner both reflects and shapes public concerns—in this case, concerns about higher education quality in relation to costs.]

There are few people who would dispute the *value* of a college education; annual reports on earnings testify to the economic advantages an associate degree or bachelor's degree holder has over a person without one. As more and more careers require entry-level skills attained in college, higher education's importance in securing access to economic and social status has become more obvious. The

perceived economic and social benefits of a college degree give a higher education an instrumental value that makes families willing to pay tuition. (For the sake of this argument, I am ignoring the intrinsic value of a college education, simply because parents tend to view college instrumentally and Boehner has framed the argument purely in terms of economic exchange.)

Very few people would disagree that the cost of a college education is getting very high. Average annual tuition increases tend to outpace inflation, and the higher cost is increasingly difficult to justify, even as an investment in a future economic benefit, because there seems to be no consistent connection between cost and academic quality or student learning. *The Chronicle of Higher Education* in October 2004 reported that the annual cost of pursuing a degree for 2004-05 at a two-year public institution was \$2,849 for commuters and \$11,350 for residents, while the annual cost at a four-year public institution ranged between \$14,640 and \$21,931. Annual costs at four-year private institutions have a shorter but higher range, from \$30,124 to \$30,295.<sup>3</sup> When the total costs of receiving an associate degree exceed \$20,000 for resident students, and those for a bachelor's degree range from \$58,000 to \$87,000 at public institutions and slightly over \$120,000 at private institutions, the return on investment—the *value* mentioned above—seems distressingly distant to those who must pay for it.

Whereas in the past questions of value outweighed questions of cost, stakeholders—from parents to policymakers—are beginning to question the *worth* of investing in college. The question of worth underlies Boehner's snide reference to rock-climbing walls and wave pools. As colleges and universities spend more money on what many regard as fripperies designed to achieve higher rankings in *U.S. News and World Report*, stakeholders are developing legitimate concerns about the connection between cost and value, or the worth of a college education.

These questions of worth have their roots in two views of college, both stimulated and nourished by higher education. The first and ultimately more pernicious view, based on the economic advantage a college degree offers, presents a college education as having a primarily private benefit. This view, taken to the extreme, sees a college education as neither public benefit nor public responsibility, and therefore not something that governments need to support. The ranking systems and college guides exacerbate this problem by ignoring the quality of student learning and concentrating on secondary elements of the



college experience (living quarters, social life, athletic teams), on extraneous characteristics like endowment size, and on indirect indicators of academic quality (faculty reputation, graduation rates and application/acceptance ratios). The second view stems from the idea that higher education does indeed have a public value in its social impact, although this view is often reduced to economic terms as well, in economic impact reports and the like.

Both views, because they have an economic basis, have caused stakeholders to begin to ask how wisely and well their money has been used, to ask institutions and faculty to be accountable for the investment of public funds and tuition dollars in higher education. And higher education's response has been woefully inadequate. As Frank Newman, Lara Couturier and Jamie Scurry have noted, there is a "dangerous gap . . . between what the public needs from higher education and how colleges and universities are serving those needs. That gap has received little attention within institutions because they lack clear measurements for their performance and because they are generally satisfied with the status quo."<sup>4</sup> The "fissures" Newman, Couturier and Scurry see between higher education's rhetoric and its performance exist on many levels, but a central one is the need for higher education to take responsibility for learning:

Ninety percent of college graduates have reported that their degree was useful in getting a job but did not prepare them with the necessary skills to succeed in the workplace. Employers also are concerned about students' lack of critical thinking, the ability to write clearly, and other skills. Despite the overall value of a college education, growing evidence suggests that students are not gaining the knowledge that they need in crucial areas.

*Colleges should determine whether actual learning is taking place on their campuses instead of focusing on surrogate performance measures of limited relevance, like the scholarly reputation of the faculty (italics added).*<sup>5</sup>

"Actual learning" is never an issue in college rankings and rarely is discussed publicly or promoted by colleges and universities themselves (with the notable exception of schools like Alverno College, which has assessed student learning

and used the results of that assessment for more than two decades). This is problematic at a time when higher education's worth, instrumental and intrinsic, is being questioned.

Higher education has exacerbated the problem by using primarily only two methods of demonstrating its quality, thereby its worth. One is voluntary participation in an accreditation process predicated upon peer review and, except for a handful of instances, on nondisclosure of specific results; in most cases, only the accreditation status of an institution is made public. The second method is an acceptance of traditional, convenient, relatively easy-to-capture measures of quality—graduation rates, years to degree completion, *U.S. News* measures—that only inferentially suggest quality and worth. Yet, because these indicators do not address such things as actual student learning, they are only indirectly relevant to current discussions of worth and quality. Furthermore, their use suggests a failure to understand what stakeholders want when they demand that institutions demonstrate and document their success in helping students learn.

Ironically, in selecting accreditation and persistence/satisfaction data as measures of accountability, higher education has selected measures that can be—and often have been—taken instead to indicate a desire for secrecy and no accountability. Rep. Howard P. “Buck” McKeon (R-Calif.) characterizes the position of higher education in this way: “Everything is fine, we are doing a great job, send us more money, and leave us alone.”<sup>6</sup> Despite publication of final accreditation decisions and a plethora of indirect indicators of success, like graduation rates required by the government, the perception of John Boehner’s predecessor as chair of the House Education and Workforce Committee is that higher education wants financing without accountability.

Sadly, higher education’s cloak of confidentiality in accreditation and the widespread use of indirect indicators of academic quality have allowed those suspicious of higher education, and those merely concerned about its quality, to fear at the very least that higher education is unwilling to be accountable in any meaningful way. Furthermore, those who would attack higher education can use this lack of meaningful communication as an indicator of higher education’s failure to facilitate student learning, perhaps even as a sign that higher education is trying to hide evidence of that failure. While there is no evidence that higher education institutions are interested in hiding failure or deceiving the

public, the lack of meaningful communication about their core public mission, facilitating student learning, can be interpreted or used to suggest that they are.

### **A New Basis for Discussions about Quality**

A general sense of dissatisfaction with higher education based on relatively weak performance on traditional but indirect measures of quality, like graduation rates, plus an accreditation system that is essentially closed to the public, have led to demands that higher education prove that it is delivering what it promises in its mission statements. When those demands came from clearly self-interested politicians and individual parents, they were often ignored. Now, however, higher education is being asked by many other groups, both within and outside higher education, to be publicly accountable and to demonstrate its worth to its stakeholders. While the statements of these groups do not necessarily define worth or accountability in the same way, they all call for a fundamental reformulation of the relationship between higher education and its stakeholders.

In its recent report “Building a Nation of Learners,” the Business-Higher Education Partnership, composed of corporate and higher education leaders, calls for “a fundamental systemic change in learning and teaching . . . in order to achieve a nation of learners. To obtain the broad analytical skills required, as well as the specific job-driven skills in demand, students need programs and courses that are both more individualized and better able to produce measurable results and standards.” The emphasis on the functionality and measurability of learning suggests a radical shift from the discipline-based structures and instruction at most institutions of higher education, and that impression is reinforced almost immediately with specifics:

When evaluating courses, programs, and styles of teaching, educators need to address questions such as: How do programs improve student leadership abilities? What kinds of multidisciplinary courses enhance analytical thinking? What learning experiences can help students become aware of global concerns and responsibilities? How can course requirements and exams enhance communication skills, both oral and written?<sup>7</sup>

This statement seems to suggest that specific knowledge within a specific disci-

pline is less important than the skills students develop in using or demonstrating that knowledge. We might infer further that traditional ways of signifying student success, like grade point averages within a major, are less indicators of academic worth than those things that higher education courses and professors traditionally do not assess in any significant or systematic way, except perhaps in a general education core.

From the point of view of a very important stakeholder group, those who employ higher education's graduates, higher education institutions need to produce evidence that students have content knowledge, but also that they can apply knowledge to new situations, can lead and work with others, can see their work in a larger (perhaps global) context and can communicate what they have done. Grade point averages, graduation rates, persistence studies and satisfaction surveys do not provide such evidence.

The Johnson Foundation's report "An American Imperative: Putting Student Learning First" makes the point much more explicitly—and damningly:

But skills such as these—written and oral communication, critical analysis, interpersonal competence, the ability to obtain and use data, the capacity to make informed judgments and the skills required in community life—are essential attributes of a liberal education when they are accompanied by discipline-based knowledge. These skills can be learned. If they are to be learned, however, they must be taught and practiced, not merely absorbed as a result of unplanned academic experience.<sup>8</sup>

The report argues strongly that discipline-based knowledge, while important, is not the only thing that must be learned in college. Explicit attention should be given to "skills" that are rarely a part of any major or are often presumed to develop in what most institutions call "general education," which in many institutions is simply a collection of distributed credit hours. It further argues that, just as what professors teach needs to transcend content without ignoring it, the ways they assess student work need to change as well:

Examinations in educational institutions (including elementary and secondary schools) normally establish competitive

rankings and sort students. They rarely diagnose strengths and weaknesses, examine needs, or suggest what steps to take next. In almost no institutions are a student's skills systematically assessed, developed, and then certified. This assessment issue transcends the needs of learners. In an institution focused on learning, assessment feedback becomes central to the institution's ability to improve its own performance, enhancing student learning in turn.<sup>9</sup>

Defining quality and performance in terms of student learning, thereby documenting success in preparing students for work and for life (the kind of preparation that stakeholders seem to want and expect), requires serious rethinking of what higher education institutions seem to value in their curriculum design, their pedagogy and their grading practices. It requires, for example, considering carefully why students are required to take three to six credits of mathematics or history as part of a general education core. If the reason is the development of analytical or critical-thinking skills, then the teaching and assessment strategies of the courses should address those skills, so that "coverage" and recall of information become less important than what a student does with them.

"An American Imperative" was published in 1993; more recently, "Accountability for Better Results" (a report issued in March 2005 by the National Commission on Accountability in Higher Education) echoes its call for accountability, but with a somewhat more complex view of responsibility for learning in higher education. While "Accountability for Better Results" argues that "better accountability for results at the institutional and state levels requires clearer goals (especially for student learning) and better information about outcomes,"<sup>10</sup> the commission goes further than other reports in recommending "reciprocal accountability: continuous dialogue [between higher education and its stakeholders], rigorous measurement of outcomes, and open disclosure of results among policymakers, institutional leaders, faculty, and students."<sup>11</sup> The concept of reciprocal accountability is both a boon and a challenge to higher education: the former because it makes clear that effective learning is the responsibility of many parties, the latter because it asserts the necessity for open dialogue. Whether the confidentiality-based culture of higher education can tolerate open dialogue with its stakeholders is open to question; that it must attempt to do so is beyond doubt.

Whatever its degree of toleration for openness, higher education is already facing the prospect of much more open discussion of student learning and educational effectiveness, at least in the processes of accreditation. While in the past regional and specialized accreditation processes tended to focus primarily on capacity issues (budget, facilities, faculty qualifications, library holdings), they have in the last decade increasingly emphasized institutional effectiveness as demonstrated by the achievement of stated student learning goals.

Last year the Council of Regional Accrediting Commissions (CRAC) published *Principles for Good Practice*, a list of five principles for regional accreditors. The first of these principles asserts, "Evaluation of an institution's success in achieving student learning is central to each Commission's function and public charter." When the statement deals with the question of evidence used for accreditation, the commissions promise to "give particular attention to how the institution's collection and use of student learning evidence helps it to achieve its learning goals." While this statement may not seem particularly radical, it in fact changes the nature of the accreditation process, forcing the institution, the commission and the visiting team to have open dialogue about the achievement of learning goals.

The statement of principles goes further than the requirement to give "particular attention" to learning; it also makes clear that institutions will be expected to develop and provide evidence of the *quality* of student learning:

*Forms of appropriate evidence.* Evidence examined by Commissions for the purpose of evaluating the quality of student learning may include:

- a. fulfillment of institutional purpose in the form of evidence of *student learning outcomes* appropriate to its educational goals;
- b. institutional *processes* for evaluating educational effectiveness, in the form of student learning goals appropriate to its mission, procedures for collecting data on student achievement of these goals, and evidence that these data are used to effect improvements in educational offerings;
- c. effective teaching and learning *practices*, including such characteristics as academic challenge, engagement of stu-

- dents with faculty and each other, active and collaborative learning, and enriching educational experiences; and
- d. institutional *capacity* in the form of a climate conducive to educational and academic freedom, and appropriate and sufficient resources for effective teaching, learning, and assessment.<sup>12</sup>

*Principles for Good Practice* clearly states the expectation that the accreditation process will deal with evidence of an institution's processes, practices and capacity for achieving student learning outcomes. While some of that evidence may be in the form of traditional indirect measures of quality, like graduation and persistence rates, the emphasis here is on the achievement of learning outcomes. Documenting learning and responding to evidence of learning become a central part of institutional accountability, at least insofar as regional accreditation agencies are concerned. It should be noted that, while the statement is not so different from the reports mentioned earlier in its concern for learning, it is much more explicit in its requirement that evidence of learning—of achievement of outcomes—be a primary indicator of institutional quality.

### **Assessment of Learning and Accountability**

The CRAC principles make it clear that stimulating, measuring, documenting and acting upon evidence of student learning are central parts of institutional accountability. As Margaret Miller has argued:

Colleges and universities should therefore continually check to be sure that [their] general goals are being reached by an appropriate and timely curriculum. They should define clearly, succinctly, and publicly their criteria and standards for graduates' attainment of these goals. . . . They should support curricular and cocurricular strategies and pedagogies to enable that learning. Finally, they should be willing to assess their results to determine how they might improve their practice.<sup>13</sup>

The collocation of institutional goals, curriculum, pedagogy and assessment in the context of publicly stated criteria and standards is indicative of the current trend to broaden the conversation on educational effectiveness to include

learning goals. It suggests the necessity to expand the concept of accountability beyond mere cost-effectiveness to actual worth. (It should be noted here that the political statements with which we began and that, to some degree, have forced this conversation, do focus on cost-effectiveness, but the concerns of other stakeholders—students, parents, employers and communities—are more complex.) Documented achievement of publicly understood learning outcomes is an accountability measure more relevant to what most stakeholders seek from higher education than a federal correlation between tuition increases and the rate of inflation.

If the learning outcome approach is more relevant an indicator of accountability than others currently being discussed outside higher education, then it is incumbent upon higher education to be proactive in pursuing it. In a sense, the regional accreditation commissions have already begun the process of redefining accountability with their principles, but higher education leaders—from presidents to heads of faculty unions—need to participate directly, fully and openly in that process. If the leaders treat the accreditation requirements as a compliance issue, rather than an opportunity to document and proclaim educational worth, higher education will jeopardize its credibility in the conversation about accountability.

Thus, the choice for higher education is a simple one: Do we develop an accountability approach that accurately depicts the quality of the education we provide, or do we wait for a higher education equivalent of No Child Left Behind? While there may be problems in developing the first alternative, the second is no alternative at all. So what is higher education to do?

First and foremost, it must embrace the idea that it should be accountable, partly out of pragmatism (public demands for accountability cannot be ignored and will not disappear), and partly out of ethical obligation (those who support higher education have a right to know how successful it is). Higher education institutions assess student learning in many ways every day, so making at least some relevant information on student learning outcomes available to stakeholders should not be difficult, especially since refusal to do so is no longer an option.

But embracing accountability has its perils at institutional and individual faculty levels. Chief among them is the fact that any accountability system will document



a degree of failure, for no institution or faculty member is perfect, and not all students are A students. A second reason for apprehension is the fact that that these data can be misused for political ends, both in legislative bodies and in department chairs' offices.

At the same time, embracing accountability offers distinct advantages. First, higher education can seize the momentum that is already building and develop credible accountability strategies that are both transparent and protective of the rights of institutions and faculty. (The other alternative is to have an externally imposed system that may do neither.) Second, it can actively make learning, not the number of keg parties or six-year graduates, the centerpiece of any discussion of accountability. Third, since stimulating learning is closer to institutional mission and faculty work than merely graduating people, accountability based on learning will be more reflective of what higher education is designed to do and thus will more likely produce impressive and positive results.

Among a number of different strategies institutions can use to assess and document the achievement of learning outcomes are standardized, discipline- or skill-oriented tests. Certification exams, graduate school entrance exams, and commercially available exams like those from ETS and ACT all provide some measurement of learning and so may well provide some information useful for documenting achievement of learning outcomes. While their major advantages are their validity, reliability and comparability, one of their major disadvantages is their necessarily general nature; they in no way can address the particular missions of individual institutions. Thus, while they are valuable for reporting and benchmarking, they are much less effective tools for improving learning or teaching at individual institutions, and are much more susceptible to misuse or misinterpretation by stakeholders and policymakers.

Other, more nuanced approaches, like the Rand Corporation's Collegiate Learning Assessment project, may offer results that are more tailored and useful to individual institutions and faculty. This critical thinking test crosses disciplines and modes of inquiry, so an institution may be able to use its results in a variety of contexts. Likewise, the National Forum on College-Level Learning, which is studying the use of multiple measures statewide in five states, offers some hope of subtler, more useful results that could well be used to improve learning.

But higher education need not go down the path of standardized testing. Most higher education institutions have at least rudimentary accountability mechanisms in the assessment systems they have been developing over the last decade, partly under pressure from regional accreditation agencies. As accrediting agencies have increasingly required institutions to produce evidence of student learning, faculty and institutions have developed or are developing reasonable, credible ways to document their degree of success in stimulating student learning at course and program levels. Further, they are recognizing that even evidence of lack of success can be used to improve teaching and learning strategies at program, course and section levels, something that is impossible with most standardized tests. Evidence of “failure” thus can be transformed into evidence of an institution’s commitment to continuous improvement if assessment data are integrated into planning, budgeting and curriculum revision.

The issue here is not measuring but using and reporting results. When the assessment movement first gathered strength in the 1980s, its emphasis was on processes for measuring learning. That emphasis shifted in the 1990s to improvement of learning. “Evidence” became a much more plastic concept that included a wide range of “data,” from validated, standardized tests to the professional judgments of faculty and external evaluators on capstone projects. How an institution measures the achievement of student learning outcomes is less important than the fact that it uses this evidence to improve learning and to engage in public discourse.

If an assessment system is to be a credible means of proving an institution’s worth to its stakeholders, it must be a system both culturally and temporally. That is, assessment must occur across campus in all departments and areas that are responsible for learning, from the classroom to the library to Student Affairs to distance education and instructional technology, and there must be common agreement on the outcomes as well as the means of assessing them.

Second, the acquisition of learning outcomes such as critical thinking, communication skills, and problem-solving—three skills that are likely to appear on most institutions’ lists of core learning outcomes—is a complex process that cannot be measured by a final examination or a grade in a single course. The outcomes must be assessed multiple times in multiple contexts. Seeing the outcomes as developing over time makes them institutional priorities, rather

than course-bound tasks, so they become the basis for conversations between students and faculty, advisors and other institutional staff, as well as a means to document institutional worth. In “Our Students’ Best Work: A Framework for Accountability Worthy of Our Mission,” the Association of American Colleges and Universities recommends such an approach for liberal education, in which outcomes are “addressed and cultivated throughout the entire educational experience” through a process of orientation, planning, milestone assessments and a capstone or culminating experience.<sup>14</sup> This sensible approach can be used throughout colleges and universities.

Assessment systems offer higher education the opportunity to reshape the dialogue about accountability in ways that are both more appropriate and more flattering to higher education (because higher education is, by and large, doing a good job of facilitating and assessing learning) than the data sets currently in place. While most current assessment systems are incomplete, flawed and inconsistent, they at least form a basis for responding to calls for accountability by opening a discussion about academic quality and students’ achievement of learning outcomes. The evidence we have been collecting to document student achievement of learning outcomes can and should become the core of a response to those demanding accountability.

It is reasonable for stakeholders to ask higher education how well students are achieving the goals we claim for them. More important, it is reasonable—and prudent—for higher education institutions to develop direct, transparent responses to those questions as quickly and as honestly as possible. We can no longer ignore the cries for accountability; we must either seize the initiative or be overwhelmed by a tide of distrust and regulation.

## ENDNOTES

<sup>1</sup> John Boehner, “A Monster Database is Not the Answer,” *Chronicle of Higher Education* (June 17, 2005): B20.

<sup>2</sup> *The College Access and Opportunity Act*, 109th Cong., 1st sess., H.R. 609. Available at <http://edworkforce.house.gov/issues/109th/education/hea/hr609billssummary.htm>.

<sup>3</sup> Eric Hoover, “Public Colleges See a 10% Rise in Tuition for 2004-5,” *Chronicle of Higher Education* (October 29, 2004). Available at <http://chronicle.com/weekly/v51/i10/10a00101.htm>.

<sup>4</sup> Frank Newman, Lara Couturier, and Jamie Scurry, "Higher Education Isn't Meeting the Public's Needs," *Chronicle of Higher Education* (October 15, 2004): B6.

<sup>5</sup> Ibid., B6-7.

<sup>6</sup> Paul Tribble, "Colleges Must Get Used to Collaborating with Congress," *Chronicle of Higher Education* (July 15, 2005): B16.

<sup>7</sup> Business-Higher Education Forum, *Building a Nation of Learners* (2004), 15.

<sup>8</sup> The Johnson Foundation. *An American Imperative: Putting Student Learning First*, 2. Available at <http://www.johnsondn.org/AmericanImperative/puttinglearning.html>.

<sup>9</sup> Ibid., 3.

<sup>10</sup> National Commission on Accountability in Higher Education, *Accountability for Better Results* (Denver: State Higher Education Executive Officers, 2005), 15.

<sup>11</sup> Ibid., 13.

<sup>12</sup> Council of Regional Accrediting Commissions, *Principles for Good Practice: Regional Accrediting Commissions* (2003).

<sup>13</sup> Margaret Miller, "The Meaning of the Baccalaureate," *About Campus* (September-October 2003), 8.

<sup>14</sup> Association of American Colleges and Universities, *Our Students' Best Work: A Framework for Accountability Worthy of Our Mission* (2004).

# The Academy Under Siege: Threats to Teaching and Learning in American Higher Education

BY ROY M. VESTRICH

*In contrast to Mundhenk, Roy Vestrich argues that traditional faculty-centered academic processes are still critical and that some of the manifestations of today's accountability movement threaten to undermine academic integrity and quality.*  
—Editors' note

In the spring of 1997, I had the opportunity to direct the London Semester program for my institution. Near the end of the semester, after months of touring castles, museums and ruins, my students listened with uncharacteristic amusement to a yeoman warder in full costume spinning varied saucy tales about past inhabitants of the Tower of London. My students were understandably engaged by tales of beheadings and public hangings, by the ominous presence of clipped winged ravens and the implements of torture, and by the monetary value of the crown jewels.

As we toured the ancient grounds, I pondered the murky history of the surrounding moat and shivered at the foreboding brilliance of the narrow entry that could become in a moment's notice a cage and then a cauldron as hot oil was released from above to boil and foil would-be invaders. It was then that I was struck by one consistent thought: these castles, for all their glory and grandeur, were the homes of rulers who were themselves ruled by fear.

At the time, I could not help but feel, with some degree of sadness, that the Tower grounds shared more than merely an architectural similarity to the traditional college campus. What hit me was the troubling reality that the world of the academy has become one in which fear frequently informs the design and sets the course of actions for institutions.

This fear runs deep. It is harbored in all ranks and categories of people who

collectively shape and maintain our higher education institutions, including administrators, trustees, faculty, students, and external constituencies such as businesses, legislatures, local communities and the press. This climate of fear has led to a siege mentality that permeates the decision-making processes at all levels and may hamper the ability of many institutions to maintain or improve the quality of student learning.

For some, especially for faculty, it is a fear of change that seems too fast and insufficiently debated; for particularly business-oriented academic managers, it is a fear of not changing fast enough to keep up with competitors; for others, it is the fear of losing power within institutions and systems; and for some it is the fear of rising costs and rising expectations from external assessors and constituents. At the most basic level, the rapidly shifting nature of the higher education enterprise has engendered for many higher education professionals a fear that their programs, departments, or very institutions will not survive what might amount to an “industry shakeout.”

During a period of declining enrollment and increasing competition for students in the late 1990s, journalist Anne Matthews noted: “The roll of dead American campuses grows each year, little noticed, little mourned.” Matthews went on to point out that “developers convert some into drug-rehab centers or magnet schools; supermarket chains and parks departments eye others.”<sup>1</sup> Perhaps even during that period only a few academic managers and faculty members worried that the local big-box developer or the regional department of recreation was standing in the wings waiting for their campus to fail so that they might have the buildings or land at a bargain price. However, the harsh reality of the times did catalyze a concern for many of us that our work and workplaces, however worthwhile, could be undermined by forces beyond our control. Some will claim that these fears are unjustified, but few will deny that economic pressures; shifting social, cultural, and political demands; and rapidly evolving communication technologies are combining to exert a profound influence on the enterprise of higher education.

An important manifestation of these pressures comes in the form of new “accountability” requirements imposed on higher education. Examples of these may include standardized testing of college students and “performance funding” to colleges and universities for achieving “outputs” such as graduation or job placement rates. Colleges are being told to hold themselves accountable to

“students as customers” and, therefore, are re-orienting academic programs and student services around pleasing students’ short-term desires. College faculty members are being asked to embrace distance education wholesale on grounds of ease and efficiency for the student, replacing face-to-face interaction between the student and the professor. Whether these changes are corroding educational quality or renewing higher education’s mission to fit today’s needs is, of course, a matter of opinion.

Faculty and professional staff should not simply circle the wagons or dig into trenches and defend the status quo as the world shifts around them. However, it is appropriate for those of us working with students every day to raise serious questions about the potential of the latest fads in institutional accountability that may undermine the things we believe traditional higher education does *right*. We have seen charts and data showing how many or few students pass standardized tests or were “pushed through the system” to graduation in primary and secondary education, and we know how these measures of dubious value have been used to attack public education and educators. We do not want such questionable indicators to replace autonomous intellectual inquiry, squelch creativity, impair original research and scholarship, or most importantly restrict the breadth and depth of student learning in higher education.

It is no accident that so many new nostrums are being initiated by government officials, think-tank academics and management specialists, rather than the working faculty. Sometimes, in fact, the people who call for new accountability regimes view it as a badge of honor that their proposals are free of faculty input. Actually, it should be a warning alarm that something is very wrong. Those who march under the banner of accountability should be obligated to make sure that they are not impairing important elements of educational success.

If, for example, the scope and focus of research, scholarship and even the arts on campus are primarily accountable to corporate sponsors or government officials, rather than dictated by the independent creativity and curiosity of scholars, then the quality of these endeavors and the possibility of making progress through open inquiry may be impaired. We need only think of the intense pressure exerted on American higher education institutions, and particularly the teaching faculty, during the McCarthy period of the 1950s to understand how stultifying such thinking can be to the free exchange of ideas. We should

not believe ourselves now immune to the kind of intrusive policies and chilling effects of the McCarthy period.

For example, some of the more conservative American political leaders, responding to the fallout from the attacks of September 11, 2001, recently have stepped up calls for political litmus tests to be used in the faculty hiring process (to offset the perceived liberal bias of faculty), and many scholars, pundits and social theorists have pointed to the potential chilling effect of the Patriot Act on freedom of speech, inquiry and thought.

We must consider, too, all the implications of the advent of electronic education, where information is conveyed and ideas are debated in the faceless and non-specific spaces of computer monitors, podcasts, and streaming video. To their credit, these technologies open the door to new information sources and permit learning to take place in a convenient fashion. However, an overreliance on these ways of communicating may have seriously deleterious effects on social interaction skills and collaborative problem-solving skills that have been essential in the development of what we commonly call human culture and society.

In fact, we may well come to a future when teachers and students are no longer linked in a geographically defined space, a *community* of scholars and learners such as the traditional college campus, but rather are linked solely via electronically mediated environments, or at best in nonresidential or commuter-based campuses. The residential campuses that remain may become largely reserves for the elite, or will function much like year-round sleep-away camps catering more and more to the entertainment needs of young adults, investing fewer and fewer resources in the teaching personnel central to their core missions.

For faculty, this shift away from physical learning communities and the de-emphasizing of academics in budgetary priorities could mean a radically different professional life. It could potentially redefine faculty's relationship to institutions, from core employees who shape the life of institutions, to program consultants or temporary hired hands who carry out policies and curricular tasks developed by noneducators. For students, this shift could mean far less guidance and individualized instruction, increasingly limited face-to-face contact with faculty, far less interaction with peers both in social and academic contexts, and far less opportunity to encounter a diverse range of opinions, ideas and ap-



proaches to academic subject matter.

In this time of rapid technological advancement for information transfer, it may be possible to conceive of a higher education delivery system that is almost void of bricks and mortar. But again, we must ask ourselves if such a system can be a secure cornerstone for shaping a society of involved citizens and for developing critical thinkers, creative spirits and engaged life-long learners.

If we look at these current trends in higher education, it is not all that hard to imagine a future when some of our most historic campuses might be themselves reduced, like the Tower of London, to mere curiosities for tourists who are escorted by guides donned in academic regalia. Giving short shrift to the important work performed by dedicated professors and students in the classrooms and laboratories, the guides will spin stories of saucy and salacious events, such as the sit-ins and love-ins of the 60s, the high jinks and hazing rituals of toga-wrapped fraternity brothers, or the epidemic of binge drinking that too often defined the popular culture images of campus life at the turn of the millennium.

This future has little appeal to those of us who have spent our lives at more traditional institutions, first as students and later as faculty members. It certainly should not resonate with the general population for many reasons, of which the most compelling should be that such a system has the potential to degrade the intellectual content and personal interchange that define a quality collegiate experience. There is much formal research recognizing the value of face-to-face human interaction as well as the importance of social relationships as part of the learning process. Even some proponents of education delivery systems that rely on the new information technologies recognize that the lack of teacher-student and student-student communication has been the Achilles' heel of such learning environments.<sup>2</sup>

Another factor that makes it difficult for college faculty to embrace some aspects of the outside accountability movement is the fact that so many of its proponents explicitly or implicitly label college professors as the problem within the system, the people who are preventing change because they are afraid to be accountable to anyone for anything. To take an extreme but not altogether atypical example, during the early stages of the public debate on accountability, Charles J. Sykes published his sharp indictment of the American professoriate,

*Profscam*. Sykes began his ill-willed work by paraphrasing H.L. Mencken's terse jibe that "anyone who really wanted to improve the universities should start by burning the buildings and hanging the professors." And Sykes went on to structure an argument around his dubious contention that "the story of the collapse of American higher education is the story of the rise of the professoriate."<sup>3</sup>

In the years since the publication of Sykes's work, more than a handful of well-respected education and social theorists have challenged and debunked his theories; but there can be no doubt that Sykes, by casting the American professor as the "real villain" to blame for the problems in American higher education, helped shape public thought and set a new agenda for greater accountability. This agenda equates true accountability with shedding any traditional academic process that reposes in college faculty the responsibility (and autonomy) for determining what the curriculum should be, teaching students in an atmosphere of academic freedom, and assessing student performance on the basis of the grades achieved by students in their classes.

Most faculty members believe that there is little justification for abandoning their autonomy. After all, higher education is a great success story. To illustrate this in purely industrial terms, just over 200,000 Americans attended college at the turn of the 20th century, 1.4 million by 1940, 2.4 million by 1946 (with the passage of GI Bill). The number more than doubled from 3.2 million in 1960 to 7.5 million in 1970, and by the end of the 20th century the number of American postsecondary students exceeded 20 million. Clearly this has been a growth industry, and one that the citizens of our society believe to be highly important in their personal and economic development.

On the other hand, as I once noted, "higher education may be a victim of its own success as an industry."<sup>4</sup> Because possessing a college degree is now essential for many in our socio-economic framework, the power brokers and the general population have increased their scrutiny of higher education. As a college degree has become necessary to reach the first rung of many career ladders, the costs of tuitions and fees have risen. Together, these two developments have made legislative bodies and the public increasingly concerned about the real value of postsecondary education as a personal and social investment. In turn, this concern has given rise to the relatively recent phenomenon of legislatures identifying specific student outcomes and dictating how higher-education

institutions should prove that they are achieving these outcomes. By redefining their role, legislators have expanded their power to define the mission and manage the activities of any institution, whether public or private, that relies to some degree on public funding.

We have witnessed a host of federal- and state-level boards and commissions conducting cost-benefit analyses of resources expended for postsecondary education. Often these analyses focus on somewhat measurable, though not necessarily indicative, variables such as graduation rates of institutions or the job placement statistics for graduates. We have also seen a rapid rise in federal and state calls for codifying and standardizing means of measuring student learning in terms of outcomes and, more generally, in terms of the role of institutions in the sphere of workforce development.

This latter issue of workforce development has become a central concern for many of the trustees and managers at our nation's public institutions as they lobby for increasingly scarce state resources. One of the most compelling lines of argument used to increase or maintain support for individual public institutions has been to focus on its role as an economic engine or training ground for regional employers. There is nothing inherently wrong with this as part of the institutional mission, but we run a dangerous course if, given all we know about economic cycles and the volatility of business, we overweight the immediate job placement of graduates as an institutional accountability measure, or if we are mandated to tailor curriculum to the specific needs of a regional employer.

For many faculty, one of the more visible aspects of this era of accountability has been the proliferation of "activist trustees" who feel themselves suddenly obligated to play a more direct role in academic program and departmental curricular matters. At times these trustees operate in a web of suspicion about faculty judgment not far from the pages of *Profscam*. Just as Sykes identified the professoriate as the "villain," many faculty members have come to identify some academic administrators and trustees as the real villains in the contemporary crisis in American higher education. However, this view might also be seen as counterproductive and no different than Sykes's broad labeling of faculty. Without question, there are many well-informed and well-intentioned men and women who hold administrative positions at all levels of the academy; and many have dedicated themselves to improving higher education by better

facilitating learning, research, scholarship and the general quality of life at both institutional and broader levels. The problem is not the general dedication of the individuals in these positions, but that too often the decisions, hailing from corporate rather than educational foundations, have imposed inappropriate aspects of corporate thinking into higher education administration, and have interfered with, rather than improved, the intellectual climate of our institutions.

But this is not a wholly new phenomenon. Consider this passage from John Dewey's 1940 essay "The Liberal College and Its Enemies":

In a country which began with no provision for higher education, in which population is rapidly expanding and where wealth is growing and so diffused that the children of those who were themselves forbidden a college education are in a position to gratify ambition to "go to college," expansion is necessary. It is not necessary to allege conspiracy when it is discovered that the members of college boards of trustees are largely men of wealth and that men of wealth are quite likely to be directors of corporations. It would be matter of surprise were it otherwise, where education is in process of constant expansion which requires constant increase and profitable investment of funds. The fact that boards of trustees do not confine their functions to the care of funds, leaving the cure of souls to the instructing body, is an historic accident, which none the less makes for a lowered standard of intellectual productivity—which it must always be remembered is synonymous with intellectual freedom.<sup>5</sup>

Dewey, I imagine, would not be surprised to learn that "historic accident" of trustees who do not confine themselves to the fiscal matters, but insert themselves into academic policy, has become commonplace in a national higher education system that has enjoyed exponential growth over the past 65 years. And I imagine as well that he would be profoundly concerned about the potential erosion of intellectual freedom and productivity, and the devaluing of the traditional role of faculty in our institutions.

This devaluing of the faculty is, as I asserted earlier, most evident in the now

widely held notion among policymakers and academic administrators with a corporate mindset, that the student is a customer, a consumer, rather than a learner.

I am not suggesting that the idea of the student as a customer or a consumer is in itself completely negative. At its best, the idea of student-as-consumer encourages all of us—policymakers, professors and students—to consider the value of a higher education. My concern is that marketplace values may usurp all others and become the primary measures of our success. There is a danger that students will become consumers first and foremost, threatening the integrity and quality of student learning. Sociologist David Riesman has suggested that “even the most shoddy, cut rate and cutthroat degrees are not necessarily frauds on the student consumer. They may in fact be examples of collusion between academic vendor and student buyer to secure a credential at some monetary cost but almost no cost in time or effort.”<sup>6</sup>

The student-as-consumer notion too often informs strategic planning at our institutions, and it has become evident in every aspect of campus life. For example, spending priorities have shifted, leading many institutions to spend more on sports and extracurricular activities and less on instruction (ratcheting up class size or relying on part-time faculty as a result). The influence of viewing students as consumers also can be seen in the research agendas, pedagogical methods and grading policies of faculty. And it is evident in the means employed for institutional assessment of student learning or outcomes. Many traditional students and their parents have taken this notion too much to heart, a fact I have faced too often as a union officer dealing with an increasing number of faculty grievances and administrative actions related to student complaints about low grades or course demands. It is a notion that has led some of my students to refer, albeit somewhat tongue-in-cheek, to the degrees they receive after four years of study not as diplomas but as receipts.

Like most higher education faculty teaching today, faculty at my institution (a public four-year institution) have had to address these calls for accountability. More and more of our work hours are spent resigning ourselves to the prevailing zeitgeist of outcomes assessment. There is much good that could come of increased faculty attention to student outcomes; in an ideal world, outcomes assessment would help individual faculty retool and improve course designs

and pedagogical methods. But too often the kinds of outcomes assessments under consideration are not tied to specific courses or areas of study, but instead are broad and sweeping evaluations of student knowledge and skills through methods such as standardized tests. Such assessments may reveal some basic information, but it is extremely difficult to translate the findings into meaningful curricular evaluation and design. Still, this broad style of assessment is a dominant part of the current movement.

To illustrate this issue, consider the following account of a meeting I had with the chancellor of the Vermont State Colleges system in 2001. At the time of the meeting, I was serving as president of the faculty federation, the AFT-affiliated local representing both the full-time and part-time faculty at four of the five system institutions. I had been asked to sit down with the chancellor on behalf of both the faculty union and the independent shared-governance bodies of our institutions, the faculty assemblies (equivalent to the faculty senates at many institutions). My mission was to present a host of faculty concerns regarding a mandate from the board of trustees and central administrative office requiring the VSC institutions to institute new outcomes assessment measures in five areas of knowledge. The trustees and the central administration had defined these areas as minimum competencies for graduation.

Included in these minimum competencies were the obvious items to measure such as writing, speaking and quantitative reasoning skills, and some more difficult outcomes to assess such as critical thinking and information literacy. It was clear from the charges given to the faculty that the administration was looking for us to develop something along the lines of a standardized testing methodology. I should point out that given the fairly strong language in both our collective bargaining agreement and the policies of our faculty assembly bodies, the administration could not merely impose these new standards, but needed to go through appropriate faculty governance channels. Still, it was apparent that the trustees and central administration believed that individual faculty members teaching a particular course title should teach essentially the same course and student outcomes therefore should be more or less uniform and measurable. On the surface, this notion might seem sensible, especially in basic skills courses, or in fundamental math and science courses, but it has little validity in courses requiring analysis and interpretation of literary or artistic works, or even in historical and sociological investigation.

For faculty such a notion of uniform methods and outcomes is anathema to our understanding of student learning and instructional autonomy, and the call for uniformity raises significant questions about the range and scope of academic freedom and the very definitions of knowledge. This view of homogeneous and interchangeable instruction is widely seen by faculty to be founded in the limited experience of academic managers and their misinformed beliefs about the nature of pedagogy, learning and the profession. A colleague and I frequently refer to this troubling notion of education as the mere transference of neatly packaged modules of information that can be stacked up free of human interference as the “*Lego Block Theory of Teaching and Learning*.”

In real-life classrooms, however, a student’s knowledge and skills are not easily measured commodities transferred from the teacher to the student, but are complex syntheses of information, experience, and both critical and creative reasoning. Faculty members are not simply conduits for the transfer of blocks of knowledge and students are not simply receptors. Teaching and learning at the postsecondary level are most often processes involving the exchange and debate of ideas, perceptions, opinions, conjectures and analyses. Though there are certainly residual elements of the lecture-based, faculty-centered teaching style in many institutions, contemporary faculty at the vast majority of our nation’s teaching institutions rarely function as sages handing over the wisdom of the ages to a new generation, but are far more often guides and facilitators helping students to uncover and discover material.

The outcome of this in many courses, particularly in the arts, humanities, history and higher-level science, is that individual students vary in their understanding and integration of materials even within a course taught by the same instructor. These variations are part of the education process and they are an appropriate outcome of student learning, but they are not easily measured in standardized format. Rather than spending so much of our time, energy and financial resources in reassessing what a student has learned in a particular course, it seems far more logical and efficient to make sure that faculty have the necessary time, resources and support to do their jobs well and provide appropriate feedback to students in a variety of manners, one of which is the assigning of grades for the work that students produce.

During the meeting with the chancellor I referred to earlier, I pointed out (both

orally and in writing) several weaknesses of the trustee-driven minimum competencies mandate. For example, there was no documentation that students were not, in fact, learning what they needed to be successful graduates, as well as little evidence offered that other institutions were employing similar broad criteria, let alone whether they were employing them successfully. The timeline for implementation was wholly unrealistic, and the fundamental belief about education and assessment—that is the *Lego Block Theory*—was misguided. I came armed with suggestions for a less standardized form of testing and far more faculty-specific and course-embedded means of assessment.

The chancellor clearly was trying to find a way to accommodate some of the faculty concerns. But it also was clear that he was not convinced about the validity of faculty-driven assessment of learning. He leaned across the table and said: “I’ll tell you what it’s [the means of assessment] not going to be, it’s not going to be that just because a student sat in a faculty’s course and got a good grade that we are going to assume he learned anything.”

On the surface, such a comment might seem appealing to higher education’s critics. Why should we merely assume that faculty actually teach something and then assess the learning of their students? But it is just as legitimate to ask in return; Why do we assume that faculty are *not* really teaching something and assess the learning of their students? What evidence do we have that real education is not taking place? There are genuine problems to address in higher education—the inadequate preparation of students entering our doors, the move to cut budgets without regard to educational value, the need to do a better job of retaining students. But faculty are right to reject the implicit notion that the answer to our difficulties is to find a better way of producing numbers in assessment documents rather than a better way of supporting dedicated professionals and their students on campus.

Over time, American colleges and universities have developed into institutional cultures and academic communities in which faculty hold primary responsibility for program development and curricular matters; engage in shared governance through established structures such as faculty senates, collective-bargaining organizations and joint committees; conduct teaching and research under an umbrella of academic freedom and instructional autonomy serving to promote intellectual inquiry and invention; and enjoy a certain degree of



employment stability after successfully completing the often rigorous process of earning tenure or multiyear renewable contracts (at institutions without tenure provisions).

It has become almost faddish to assert that these processes, particularly tenure for full-time faculty, do nothing more than give the faculty so much autonomy and job security that they cease caring about their students and working hard for them. This is not so clear, however, when one looks at the facts.

For example, in the Vermont State Colleges (VSC) system, which consists of five institutions (three four-year institutions, a two-year technology institute and a community college spread out over 12 locations around the state), enrollments by headcount grew by over 3,000 students between 1990 and 2004 to the current level of approximately 12,000 students, but the number of full-time faculty in the system has remained relatively constant, hovering between 260 and 275 during the same period. This is due to the fact that this system, like many others, has severely limited the hiring of new full-time tenure-track faculty and opted instead for more part-time faculty. The institution with the largest growth in enrollment, the Community College of Vermont (CCV), has no full-time faculty, but relies solely on part-time instructors.<sup>7</sup>

The Vermont model can be utilized to demonstrate some of the potential problems associated with the breakdown of traditional institutions. At the four campus-based institutions, the faculty fall more or less into the traditional institution mode; and even in the hardest of times, such as contentious labor disputes during contract negotiations, there is a strong sense of community at each campus. On the other hand, CCV faculty members, or I should say “instructors” since the college does not use the term “faculty,” have no official place in institutional decision-making, have no job security, no offices, no phones, a pay-rate below their counterparts in the unionized part-time faculty at the other institutions, no healthcare or retirement benefits, minimal opportunities for professional development and little incentive for developing loyalty to the institution. As attractive as this model is from a purely financial perspective in its ability to keep instructional costs down and therefore increase accessibility, especially for lower-income and nontraditional students, one must ask questions about the impact of such a transient instructor structure on the scope and quality of student learning.

Recently, Maine restructured its technological centers into a new community college system that is similar to the Vermont model in its heavy reliance on part-time faculty and its programmatic ties to state workforce development needs. A number of faculty leaders in the Maine University system have expressed concern that the Maine Community College and statewide system reorganization will undermine the future viability of the more traditional institutions.<sup>8</sup>

The Vermont and Maine community college models and analogous systems around the nation will, as they evolve, present real challenges to traditional academic institutions, particularly to public comprehensive institutions as they are forced to adjust to an evermore competitive environment for attracting students and securing state or federal resources. But these challenges may be minor compared to those presented by the new players in higher education from both profit and nonprofit sectors that are committed to the expansion and acceptance of technology-based distance learning delivery systems. Olcott and Schmidt note: “Increased accountability by public, legislatures and new student ‘consumers’ has served as a catalyst for academic leaders and policymakers to re-examine the traditional mission structures, and functions of the university and its faculty.”<sup>9</sup>

The authors argue that faculty should embrace changes engendered by the technological revolution and become active players in the “transformational markets” created by newly empowered student consumers. Central to this thinking is that only insulated academics themselves care about higher education traditions, and the external constituencies, such as businesses, the public and legislatures, as well as students/consumers themselves, ultimately care only about cost-effectiveness and “producing graduates who are employable and have skills needed to enter the workforce.”<sup>10</sup>

Having had numerous opportunities to testify on higher education issues at both state and federal levels over the past decade, I can say with some authority that many legislators do indeed care about issues of student learning and success that are broader than merely employment statistics, costs and graduation rates. Still, the idea that graduates should be prepared for the workplace and exit with documented employment skills has become, as I mentioned earlier, a central force in trustee and institutional strategic planning. Given the significant costs of a college education and the high debt loads of many graduates, it is a reasonable

concern. But to assume it has not been an element considered by faculty involved in program development in previous and current generations is patently false. Only at the most elite of institutions or in some especially theory-based graduate programs have faculty ever felt free to ignore how their approaches to subject matter and their overall contribution to students' development might fit into the "real world" outside of academia. And even these most eclectic of faculty may have understood themselves to be in the curious business of colleague creation, preparing the next generation of scholars, researchers and teachers.

The fact that faculty hold themselves accountable for the general employment skills of their students, along with the breadth and depth of knowledge, is not new. What has changed, however, is that faculty are now being asked to align their students' skills and knowledge with the needs of specific businesses and external stakeholders that can exert pressure on institutional managers and leaders. These pressures can lead to planning that is myopic in scope and practice, and potentially damaging to the core mission of most traditional American higher education institutions.

Though mission statements vary from college to college in wording and emphasis, it is probably safe to suggest that a generic form might read: *The mission of this college is to foster broadly educated, productive citizens, who are capable of critical thinking and possess the knowledge, skills and abilities necessary to contribute to society in positive, meaningful ways and to engage in lifelong learning.*

We can compare this admittedly generic mission statement with the very specific mission of a leading for-profit institution, the University of Phoenix:

The mission of the University of Phoenix is to educate working adults to develop the knowledge and skills that will enable them to achieve their professional goals, improve the productivity of their organizations, and provide leadership and service to their communities.<sup>11</sup>

In the latter mission statement, a fairly rote form of teaching and the measurement of placement rates make sense as forms of accountability. In the first mission statement, simplistic formulas of this nature do not seem to make much sense. The differences between these statements should become apparent

immediately. The first recognizes that higher education serves a greater purpose in the development of society and culture; the second emphasizes the benefits to individuals and employers in a market economy.

Faculty members are right—and within their rights—to view the latter with suspicion, even fear, and to defend those aspects of traditional higher education that are threatened by poor planning and thinking but are worth preserving. The crisis in American higher education may come down to a tug-of-war, pitting those who believe in the value of history, intellectual inquiry, and the social responsibility of individuals and institutions, against those who believe in the primacy of competition and the pursuit of individual advancement within a corporate culture. In a recent interview, the authors of a recent study on the changes taking place in American universities, Zemsky, Wegner and Massy, express a similar critical concern:

What worries us most is that universities and colleges have become so preoccupied with succeeding in a world of markets that they too often forget the need to be places of public purpose as well... More than ever before, these institutions are content to advance graduates merely in their private, individual capacities as workers and professionals. In the rush to achieve market success, what has fallen to the wayside for too many institutions is the concept of educating students as citizens — graduates who understand their obligations to contribute to the collective well-being as active participants in a free and deliberative society. In the race for private advantage, market success too often becomes a proxy for mission attainment.<sup>12</sup>

For academics and academic policymakers, these are indeed turbulent times. If we are in the process of moving out of the “industrial age” into the “information age,” we need to be careful not to assume that planning for the future means discarding the past. We might be able to learn valuable lessons from the educational planners who struggled with a shift from a preindustrial to a highly mechanized society more than a century ago. I, for one, believe there is common ground to be found on which the future structures of higher education can take shape. We need to temper the rush to utilize new technologies with our deep

understanding of sound pedagogical practice and a genuine appreciation for academic traditions. For these evolving and emerging higher education structures to be sound environments for student achievement, they must be rooted in the deep and solid foundations of our traditional learning communities that have stood the test of time.

## ENDNOTES

<sup>1</sup> Anne Matthews, *Bright College Years: Inside the American Campus Today* (Chicago: University of Chicago Press, 1997), 234.

<sup>2</sup> Sarah Guri-Rosenblit, "Tower of Babel Syndrome in the Discourse on Information Technologies in Higher Education," *Global E-Journal of Open Flexible and Distance Education 2001* (2001): 28-38.

<sup>3</sup> Charles J. Sykes, *Profscam: Professors and the Demise of Higher Education* (Washington, D.C.:Regnery Gateway 3, 1988).

<sup>4</sup> Roy Vestrich, "Barbarians at the Campus Gates: Popular Culture and Higher Education Reform" (Panel presentation at Popular Culture Association Annual Meeting, San Diego, Cal., 1999).

<sup>5</sup> John Dewey, *Education Today* (New York: Greenwood Press, 1940), 192.

<sup>6</sup> David Riesman, *On Higher Education: The Academic Enterprise in the Era of Rising Student Consumerism* (New Brunswick: Transaction, 1998), 117.

<sup>7</sup> Information on enrollment and employment available at [www.vsc.edu](http://www.vsc.edu).

<sup>8</sup> Reports of concerns about the Maine restructuring appeared in numerous sources: see *Chronicle of Higher Education*, October 1, 2004.

<sup>9</sup> Don Olcott, Jr. and K.J. Schmidt, "Redefining Faculty Policies and Practices for the Knowledge Age. *Global E-Journal of Open Flexible and Distance Education 2001*: 46-61. Available on-line: [www.ignou.ac.in/e-journal/contents/don\\_olcott.htm](http://www.ignou.ac.in/e-journal/contents/don_olcott.htm).

<sup>10</sup> Ibid., 46.

<sup>11</sup> Mission statement available on the University of Phoenix Web site: [www.phoenix.edu](http://www.phoenix.edu).

<sup>12</sup> Interview from *Inside Higher Ed* (online, September 22, 2005): [www.insidehighered.com](http://www.insidehighered.com).

# Higher Education, Government and Expectations of Academic Quality and Accountability: Where Do We Go from Here?

BY JUDITH S. EATON

**W**hile higher education, the federal government and the states have sustained a robust and valuable partnership to provide education to millions of students each year, that partnership is sometimes strained by differences around the key issues of academic quality and accountability. In the current climate, higher education seeks to sustain important traditional notions of academic quality (talented faculty, challenging curricula) accompanied by attention to accountability primarily through self-regulation and self-responsibility. Government officials at the state and federal levels see academic quality primarily in terms of how well higher education performs and continues to press for greater accountability based on expected results of higher education performance. At the same time, there is a growing tendency for government at both levels to prescribe how higher education operates in the academic sphere.

*While the partnership and differences continue, four emerging trends are influencing the current climate of academic quality and accountability: universalization, globalization, electronically-delivered distance learning, and electronic technology's impact on the availability and sharing of information. Both higher education and government would benefit from reflection on these trends as a means to examine how they will address academic quality and accountability in the future, and how they might enhance their partnership through diminution of differences.*

## Introduction

Higher education, the federal government and state government have long been joined in a common enterprise: the education of society such that individuals can lead productive and satisfying lives, contribute to the common good, participate in government and civil society, and enrich the social and cultural fabric of the country. Higher education institutions provide the education which government subsidizes considerably. If individuals can achieve their educational goals, the nation and the various states also prosper.

At the same time, the participation of higher education and government in this common enterprise is punctuated with some differences of opinion about two

concepts fundamental to higher education and government alike: academic quality and accountability. Higher education, the federal government and the states sometimes agree about what constitutes quality and accountability. At other times, their respective expectations vary considerably. The situation is complicated by the interrelationship of quality and accountability: the definition of quality can drive the expectations of accountability, and setting accountability expectations is often tantamount to defining quality.

To examine these issues, we will look at higher education and the defining features of academic quality and accountability. First, how do higher education leaders approach these vital matters? Second, we will examine government and perspectives of higher education: What do government officials expect with regard to higher education's responsibility for academic quality and accountability? Third, we will spend some time exploring the emerging trends that affect academic quality and accountability: What is driving these issues at this time? Finally, what recommendations can we offer about these emerging trends and how higher education and government can address academic quality and accountability in the future?

## **Current Higher Education Views of Academic Quality and Accountability**

### **Academic quality**

Faculty and administrators, when asked about academic quality, usually refer to the resources and processes needed for a vibrant learning environment. For many, a traditional view of higher education academic quality is about a credentialed and talented faculty, robust academic standards, research productivity, and rich and diverse curricula. These characteristics of quality are buttressed by adequate financial resources and physical facilities. In this context, there is often discussion about fundamental academic values such as responsible institutional autonomy, academic freedom and commitment to a mission-based system as vital to the academic success of higher education.

This view of higher education rests on an acknowledgment that critical academic decisions should be and have been, for centuries, the province of faculty. Faculty decide the content of curricula and academic standards. Faculty develop new programs and revise existing programs. Faculty are responsible for deci-

sions about transfer of credit. Faculty are pivotal in decisions about the organizational structure of a college or university through which academic programs will be offered. Faculty, through these acts, define the academic quality of the higher education enterprise for millions of students.

### **Accountability**

For those in higher education, “accountability” is often about self-responsibility and self-regulation of academic quality. Higher education is responsible for assuring that institutions and programs meet threshold quality expectations and improve over time. Faculty and administrators also maintain that they are being accountable when they engage in periodic accreditation—a standards-based, trust-based, judgment-based system of peer review of the quality of institutions and programs. These same individuals believe that assuring the quality of higher education in this manner means that they are also accountable to students and the public. Accountability is about professionals judging professionals.

Institutional self-responsibility for quality dates back to the oldest of U.S. colleges and universities. Self-regulation through accreditation of institutions and programs has been in place for more than 100 years. Based on this self-responsibility and self-regulation, U.S. higher education has enjoyed significant independence and self-determination of action throughout its history.

## **Current Government Views of Academic Quality and Accountability**

### **Federal Government**

#### ***Academic quality***

While the federal government does not have an official description of “academic quality,” it does have expectations of the results associated with students entering and completing a higher education program, usually captured by calls for reporting on graduation rates, job placement rates, transfer rates, and attrition and retention. Officials tend to focus on these results to assess the performance of colleges and universities, yet have traditionally deferred to the higher education community about the role of faculty in determining how these results are achieved.

As the federal government continues to expand its financial support for higher education—e.g., providing \$69 billion in student grants and loans through the



Higher Education Act in 2002<sup>1</sup>—this deference to higher education’s judgment about academic quality is diminishing. Federal officials are becoming more and more engaged in what they seek from higher education—going beyond their interest in results to make judgments about how they want higher education to operate in the academic arena. In the current reauthorization of the Higher Education Act that has been in underway since 2003, for example, some members of Congress are quite prescriptive about how higher education should address academic matters such as transfer of credit, academic standards for distance learning and student achievement, rather than deferring to higher education.

### ***Accountability***

For the federal government, accountability is about performance and results (e.g., graduation, job placement), now accompanied by increasing attention to how higher education carries out its academic responsibilities. Some members of Congress and the executive branch are starting to display impatience with faculty academic decision-making and the factors to which higher education points as evidence of quality (e.g., the credentialing of faculty, structure of curriculum). While these officials may acknowledge the value of this evidence, they continue to expect higher education to also provide evidence of the results that government officials think are more important. This approach to accountability is not confined to academic quality; it permeates the government’s approach to financial and other areas of operation (e.g., research) as well.

The federal government’s emphasis on results is affecting self-regulation through accreditation as well. Government has relied on self-regulation of higher education through accreditation for more than 50 years. However, there is an increasing tendency for federal officials to pursue accountability by additionally regulating accreditation itself through the federal recognition process.<sup>2</sup> Federal officials are placing more and more pressure on accreditation to play a harder-edged accountability role. For example, in the current reauthorization, members of Congress are seeking significant additional controls on accreditation, using these bodies to assure that congressional prescriptions for academic matters such as those mentioned above (e.g., transfer of credit and student achievement) are realized.

## **State Government**

### ***Academic quality***

State governments spend \$70 billion annually in support of instruction, research, public service and student aid.<sup>3</sup> States, too, have evolved in their expectations of academic quality, moving from deference to higher education's own definition of quality to additional state-level prescriptions about the contribution public institutions must make to meet state needs and goals. At the state level, we hear more and more about higher education in the service of state priorities, and especially the need for alignment of public higher education with a state's needs.

### ***Accountability***

States are using mechanisms such as performance funding, performance reporting and "report cards" to hold higher education accountable. In this context, accountability is about appropriate use of state funds to meet state priorities and the importance that states attach to higher education as a resource for economic development. Arizona, Connecticut, Iowa, Kentucky, North Dakota and South Dakota are among the states that have developed and are refining accountability systems using these concepts.<sup>4</sup>

Higher education institutions and government, then, find themselves united in commitment to higher education and its importance to society. They are sometimes at odds, however, with regard to norms of academic quality and what counts as accountability. This is driven to a significant degree by a shift in government attitude: higher education may be too important a resource to leave judgment of its effectiveness solely to higher education professionals. The key features of the current climate of academic quality and accountability are (1) the preference for higher education to sustain valuable traditional notions of academic quality with attention to accountability primarily through self-regulation and self-responsibility, (2) a preference at the state and federal levels to press for greater accountability based on expected results of higher education performance, and (3) a growing tendency for government at both levels to prescribe how higher education operates in the academic sphere.

## **Emerging Trends Affecting Academic Quality and Accountability**

Four emerging trends are influencing the current academic quality and accountability climate. These are: (1) the universalization of higher education, (2)

internationalization of higher education, (3) the expansion of electronically-based distance learning, and (4) electronic technology's expansion of access to information and communication. These trends punctuate the perspectives of higher education and government. They have the potential for reshaping how higher education and government address the vital issues of academic quality and accountability in the future.

### **Universalization**

Universalization of higher education refers to the ongoing expansion of participation in higher education. In the U.S., universalization is, in many ways, a product of the 1960s and the post-World War II baby boom. Universalization also involves a well-documented sense of students, employers and the public that some education after high school is essential to economic and social well-being. As of 2000, 63 percent of high schools graduates go on to some form of postsecondary education or training in the United States immediately following graduation.<sup>5</sup> In the current climate, this percentage is likely to continue to grow.

Universalization encourages a pragmatic view of higher education as valuable primarily because it provides a credential and leads to desired employment. This is in contrast to a more traditional view of higher education as valuable based, first and foremost, on its pivotal role in individual intellectual development. Universalization has reinforced the vital importance of equity issues in higher education. On the negative side, the demand for higher education associated with universalization has also been a factor in the growth of fraudulent providers of higher education—degree mills and accreditation mills—that can coarsen the value of legitimate degrees and the earning of accredited status.

### ***Impact on academic quality and accountability***

The higher education community has responded to universalization by expanding access, diversifying programs and other offerings, and enriching its capacity to serve more types of students more of the time, most recently through electronic delivery. A powerful example of higher education's response to universalization has been the establishment of the open admission institution, especially the two-year community college. These colleges, as well as open admission four-year institutions, have been the most responsive to universalization. Demand associated with universalization has also been met through continuing education programs, electronically-based distance learning and higher education-

business partnerships focused on education for work.

In the main, colleges and universities have addressed academic quality by continuing to set high academic standards in the context of universalization, focusing on institutional mission and the student population being served. For example, the graduation rates expected of open admission institutions are quite different from the rates expected of highly selective institutions. At the same time, the community has retained its commitment to core academic values of responsible institutional autonomy, academic freedom and a mission-based system.

For government, universalization has tended to reinforce a pragmatic and market-driven view of the quality of higher education. Federal officials often speak of universalization when they speak of higher education as a consumer good that has value primarily when it results in a credential. Because of the demand for higher education, it should be subject to market forces and thus consumer protection is important. Higher education for work is more significant than higher education for individual intellectual development.

Universalization lends weight to the quality and accountability perceptions of government, both federal and state. Universalization reinforces government arguments about quality defined as results and accountability. In this context, the goal of universalization is about an educationally prepared citizenry. Attendance at colleges and universities, however valuable, is not enough. Acquisition of credentials is essential. This approach supports the call of both federal and state governments for higher education aligned with federal and state priorities. It underscores the need for attention to equity issues.

### **Internationalization**

The internationalization of higher education is about expansion of curricula to include additional language preparation, emphasis on studies that address a diverse array of societies and cultures, and increased study abroad. The centuries-old international community of scholars and researchers is growing, through faculty exchanges and appointments of faculty from countries outside the U.S.. Internationalization is also about institutional expansion: creation of programs and campuses to operate in other countries, partnerships with colleges and universities outside the U.S., and joint degrees.

Internationalization has been buoyed by the availability of electronically delivered distance learning. This has had both positive and troublesome consequences. On the positive side, countries with significant distance delivery capacity (U.S., United Kingdom, Australia) have played a valuable role in expanding higher education opportunity. On the other hand, the plethora of distance learning providers are not all legitimate and there are few cues to potential students in especially developing countries about how to distinguish reliable from unreliable providers.

Internationalization has put a spotlight on private higher education. First, the tradition of private nonprofit higher education, so familiar and respected in the U.S., is relatively uncommon in other countries. They have little experience and thus understanding of the legitimacy of these types of institutions for their countries—although they view, e.g., Harvard, Stanford and Yale in the United States as flagships of international quality. Second, there is a tendency internationally to think that all “private” higher education is for-profit education—accompanied by significant distrust of this phenomenon. The current result is confusion about the role of private higher education and apprehension about exporting it, especially when it comes from the United States. Unfortunately, the success of some questionable for-profit providers (“degree mills”) is exacerbating this situation. And, at least to date, there have been serious limitations on what the U.S. and other major exporting countries have been able to do to address this issue.

Internationalization has also injected market issues into deliberations about higher education in an international setting. Trade negotiations, whether the World Trade Organization’s negotiation through the General Agreement on Trade in Services or other trade agreements, sometimes consider the availability of higher education as one of the services of a negotiating country. This can quickly lead to discussions of vital academic matters such as transfer of credit and recognition of degrees. Some government officials and some in the higher education community are raising serious questions about the appropriateness of addressing these academic matters in the context of regulation of trade, and about whether the market should emerge as the ultimate arbiter of these issues in an international setting.

### ***Impact on academic quality and accountability***

For both higher education and government, internationalization is also about

norms of academic quality. As students, faculty and institutions are increasingly mobile, the issue of how to determine quality in an international setting becomes more and more important. Who decides academic quality? Is it the institution? The country in which an institution is located? Or, as some multinational organizations (e.g., UNESCO, OECD) have suggested, should we establish a single set of international quality standards that provide a framework for student, faculty and institutional mobility?

Internationalization has raised fundamental questions about the current role of national governments in relation to higher education institutions and programs. This is accompanied by a questioning of the national governments' role in establishing conditions of academic quality and accountability. The issue centers on the feasibility or desirability of setting international norms for higher education and its quality that would supersede the work of national governments and institutions of higher education. Advocates of such international norms sometimes point to the success of the business world's International Organization for Standardization (ISO), located in 153 countries, as one type of international currency of quality.

Internationalization is affecting both government and higher education by raising questions yet-to-be-answered about responsibility for cross-border academic quality and accountability. Who is responsible for norms of academic quality—is this the primary responsibility of individual institutions and faculty, national governments or international bodies? With regard to accountability, to whom does the higher education community answer—itsself, national governments or international bodies?

### **Electronically delivered distance learning**

The history of U.S. higher education is in part a story of embracing diversity—accommodating and welcoming progressive variation in students, faculty, curricula and institutional types. We have also witnessed increasing diversity of modes of instruction—how higher education is “delivered.” The most dramatic diversification of modes of instruction currently underway is electronically delivered distance learning: synchronous or asynchronous instruction relying on Web-based or Internet-based instructional tools and content.

Distance learning courses, programs and degrees have grown enormously in

the last five years, along with the number of colleges and universities that have chosen to engage this delivery system. Distance learning often involves a recasting of curricula to engage students in a online setting. It has significantly altered the faculty-student and student-student relationship. It has contributed to the mobility of both faculty and students. During 2000-01, 2,320 of accredited, degree-granting institutions offered distance learning courses, serving more than three million students.<sup>6</sup>

### ***Impact on academic quality and accountability***

Distance learning has raised fundamental questions about academic quality. The initial tendency within higher education and government was to use the quality expectations of site-based education as the basis for judging the quality of distance-based delivery. The quality of distance learning was often justified in terms of being “as good as” site-based learning.

More recently, however, judgment about the quality of distance learning is based on whether traditional indicators of quality (e.g., challenging curricula, appropriate academic standards) are fully addressed through this alternative delivery. For example, faculty who teach in a distance learning mode are committed to an effective working relationship with students. However, the way this relationship plays out in a distance learning setting is different from how it plays out in a classroom setting. The former involves considerable skill in written communication (e.g., e-mail, chat rooms) while the latter relies more heavily on skill at verbal exchange.

With regard to accountability, both higher education and governments have worried about how to assure quality in an distance learning setting. Accredited colleges and universities that offer distance learning have been able to readily address this through faculty leadership in developing distance learning curricula and standards of achievement. Both federal and state governments have relied on the work of these institutions and their accreditors to assure that government funds supporting students are going to reliable providers of distance learning.

At the same time, there is a universe of other distance learning providers for which we do not have evidence of quality. The federal government seeks to protect the public against fraud and abuse, wanting some restrictions on distance

learning in this regard. The 2004 Senate hearings on federal employees who have obtained degrees from distance learning “degree mills” are a case in point. These hearings focused on those who are misled into believing that credentials from degree mills have the same value as degrees from legitimate institutions, and on those who knowingly obtain fraudulent credentials and may not have appropriate skills for the work they are employed to do, thereby endangering the public.

State governments have a difficult time overseeing distance learning. This is because distance learning crosses boundaries, allowing providers to easily operate independent of a state. Although site-based higher education providers must be authorized at the state level in order to operate, distance-learning providers can easily by-pass this obligation. The Internet is not state-controlled. On the one hand, most of the distance learning currently available is offered by site-based institutions that are subject to state scrutiny. On the other hand, there is a burgeoning world of totally virtual distance-learning providers that escape such scrutiny, some of which may be classified as “degree mills” harming students and society by issuing bogus degrees and conducting other activities that are considered fraud and abuse.

Distance learning, then, challenges higher education and government to consider alternative norms of quality as well as to think about appropriate accountability measures, especially when working with providers that fall outside the scope of federal and state authority.

### **Electronic technology and the impact on information and communication**

Electronic technology is having an impact on academic quality and accountability in more systemic ways, going well beyond distance-learning delivery. First, there is a dramatic increase in the availability of information about very nearly everything. Second, the ease with which this information can be communicated has increased significantly.

Technology has expanded both the amount and the type of information available. Higher education institutional Web sites continue to grow as sources of information about the college or university resources and operations. As more information about an institution becomes available electronically, the institution operates increasingly in a national or international domain, and becomes



less local or regional. For example, college and university presidents who, until recently, garnered only local attention now are scrutinized by a national audience. Intriguing faculty behavior is similarly affected.

Federal and state governments are accumulating more and more information about their public colleges and universities, in part because of the expanded ease of reporting using electronic means. In some states, this is taking the form of a focus on student learning outcomes and institutional performance. There are a number of state-level projects such as the National Forum on College-Level Learning that is establishing a common set of measures for goals, plans and outcomes to allow cross-state comparisons.<sup>7</sup> *Measuring Up 2004* evaluates and grades the 50 states based on their higher education performance.<sup>8</sup> Governments are becoming less dependent on individual institutions of higher education to provide and analyze information about quality.

Technology also has expedited the communication of this information. For example, instant information about graduation rates has enabled the Education Trust ([www.collegeresults.org](http://www.collegeresults.org)) to provide a service allowing anyone who is interested to obtain the graduation rates of any higher education institution in a federal database. Even more significant, one can massage the data for comparative purposes, such as to compare graduation rates among institutions in a state, a region or by type of institution. It is easy to envision a future in which expansion of information accompanied by common definitions applied to academic and other higher education functions can yield a treasure trove of comparable data.

### ***Impact on academic quality and accountability***

The potential impact of the expansion of information and communication on academic quality can be profound. Until recently, an individual higher education institution was the best source of information about its performance and work with students. The institution was the main arbiter of its quality. However, as access to information expands, institutions may be giving up their positions of expertise. Collection of data, whether by government or another outside source (e.g., *U.S. News and World Report*) can have the effect of shifting the expertise outside the academy. This loss of control of information about academic quality can mean that other sources (e.g., the government or *U.S. News and World Report*) can and are developing their own norms about quality.

With this new opportunity to define academic quality, government and other sources can significantly expand their call on institutions to be accountable based on expectations of quality different from those decided by an institution. For example, the current emphasis on institutional performance defined in terms of “rates”—graduation rates, transfer rates, retention rates—is more and more attractive to federal and state governments. And, this is not limited to quality issues. The current effort by the federal government to track rates of tuition increases (as proposed by the House of Representatives) would be very difficult to do without the expanded access to information and distribution of that information.

### **Some Recommendations: The Emerging Trends and Addressing Academic Quality and Accountability in the Future**

These emerging trends and their effect on the climate of academic quality and accountability can provide opportunities for higher education and government to reconsider their respective approaches to these issues. The following recommendations are based on the assumption that higher education can and should continue to maintain a leadership role in defining academic quality and accountability—a contention that may be challenged by federal and state officials. While many other initiatives can be undertaken, the following would sustain the robustness of both academic quality and accountability:

1. *A Dialogue about Academic Quality.* Higher education, federal and state officials need a dialogue on their differences about academic quality. We need a series of national and state level discussions about differences in views and how we want to address these issues in the future. The goals of these discussions would be to enhance understanding and perhaps find some common ground. Absent this dialogue, the traditional faculty role in defining academic quality is at risk of being overtaken. Given the commitment of the higher education community to responsible institutional autonomy, academic freedom and a mission-based system of higher education, how do we assure the vibrancy of faculty leadership in the determination of academic quality? Are federal and state officials persuaded that higher education leadership can adequately address academic quality in the future? Or will these officials, lacking such conviction, continue to pursue a path of prescribing what counts as academic quality?

2. *Strategic Use of Technology to Enhance Higher Education's Academic Leadership Role.* Higher education faculty and administrators need to undertake a strategic analysis of the impact of technology on information and communication, especially focusing on the implications for who determines academic quality. This analysis should address whether there is an emerging competition about who is the primary authority on academic quality and how to address this. For higher education, the goal here would be to capture the technology to retain a leadership role in defining academic quality.
3. *Addressing International Norms for Quality and Accountability and Creating a U.S. Voice.* Higher education and government need to address the challenging issue of international norms for academic quality and accountability. This needs to be done both nationally and internationally. The goal would be to position U.S. institutions and government with regard to these issues and to assure that the U.S. is a significant participant in ongoing international discussions. At present, the U.S. role (whether government or higher education) in international deliberations is episodic and without a policy framework.
4. *Attention to Degree Mills and the Role of Distance Learning.* Higher education and government need to explore and develop means to protect students and the public from degree mills and fraudulent credentials, both nationally and internationally. The goal may ultimately be additional legislation particularly focused on distance learning, but colleges, universities and accrediting organizations are central to deciding what the legislation would be. Absent some effort, we are on a path toward devaluing legitimate higher education through our lack of attention to questionable providers.

## ENDNOTES

<sup>1</sup>Hartle, Terry, Christopher Simmons, and Becky Timmons. *Paying for College: How the Federal Higher Education Act Helps Students and Families Pay for a Postsecondary Education*. Washington D.C.: American Council on Education, 2003.

<sup>2</sup> The federal government routinely scrutinizes the quality and effectiveness of accrediting organizations that provide access to federal funds based on standards contained in the Higher Education Act, a process called "recognition."

<sup>3</sup>State Higher Education Executive Officers, National Commission on Accountability in Higher Education. *Accountability for Better Results*. 2005.

<sup>4</sup>Ibid.

<sup>5</sup>Eaton, Judith S. Is Accreditation Accountable? The Continuing Conversation Between Accreditation and the Federal Government. Washington D.C.: Council for Higher Education Accreditation, 2003.

<sup>6</sup>National Center for Education Statistics. "Postsecondary Education Quick Information System." *Distance Education of Degree-Granting Postsecondary Institutions: 2000-2001*. United States Department of Education, Institute of Education Sciences, NCES 2003-017, July 2003.

<sup>7</sup>SHEEO, 2005.

<sup>8</sup>National Center for Public Policy and Higher Education. *Measuring Up 2004: The National Report Card on Higher Education*. San Jose, California, 2004.

# Graduation Rates as a Measure of College Accountability

BY LAWRENCE GOLD AND LINDSAY ALBERT

*A great deal of attention in public policy circles has been focused on the idea of using college graduation rates to measure institutional accountability. Lawrence Gold and Lindsay Albert examine the status of graduation-related accountability movements, cite shortcomings in the value of graduation rates as an accountability measure and suggest different approaches to address retention issues.*

—Editors' note

## Introduction

College graduation rates are often cited as an important way to judge the accountability of colleges and universities—or, as one “output” among others in evaluating institutional performance. The thinking goes as follows: the higher the graduation rate, the better the college’s performance—the lower the graduation rate, the poorer the college’s performance. Some observers suggest that we should reward colleges that do a good job (i.e., give them a financial reward) and conversely withdraw some funding to institutions which are not doing well by this measure. Sometimes, this thinking takes the more benign form of offering rewards for good performance but not punishing institutions for low graduation rates. Other observers suggest that institutional graduation rates should be publicized as a consumer measure.

Whichever option is chosen, the intention is to spur institutions to work harder to do a better job of graduating their students. As we will see, using graduation rates in this way has been under discussion in the states for some time. The issue also has figured in the current congressional process of reauthorizing the federal Higher Education Act. It is almost sure to arise again in the deliberations of a commission that U.S. Education Secretary Margaret Spellings has formed to look at the future of higher education.

This paper will raise serious questions about the value of using graduation rates, in the way they are currently calculated, as an accountability measure. We will demonstrate that the formula used to measure graduation rates at the federal level is far too limited and rigid to present an accurate picture of student retention. For example, the formula only counts students who begin college as full-time, first-time students and who graduate from the institution where they started. The calculation only covers a six-year period after admissions to a four-year institution. Therefore, the formula can not take into account students who transfer from one college to another, students who attend part-time at some point during their college careers, students who have financial responsibilities that prevent them from graduating quickly, or students who enter college to improve their job skills and not necessarily to obtain a degree. Furthermore, we believe that using graduation rates to reward or punish colleges and universities may have the perverse consequences of taking money away from the schools serving the neediest population of students or of encouraging grade inflation to produce more graduates.

At the same time, we will demonstrate that there are other, more important factors accounting for low retention. Existing data already indicates the major causes of low retention—student financial concerns, family responsibilities, under-preparation for college, getting “lost” in the system, etc. Drawing from this data, we will suggest a number of ways that the federal and state government, along with campus administration, can intervene successfully to improve retention and raise achievement—but merely counting caps and gowns presents an inaccurate and misleading picture of what is going on and how to cure the problems we face.

This article will examine arguments such as these, many of which were initially presented in *More Than Counting Caps and Gowns*, a 2003 report by the American Federation of Teachers, Higher Education Department.<sup>1</sup> The AFT report, developed with the assistance of policy analysts John B. Lee and Lawrence Gladieux, summarizes the shortcomings in federal graduation data, reviews factors that could tell us the real causes of retention problems, and suggests approaches that might help. Using *Caps and Gowns* as a starting point, this article will go on to offer new information on today’s graduation-rate policies at the state and federal levels. We will 1) examine graduation rates as an accountability measure; 2) suggest factors that truly affect retention and completion; 3) outline account-

ability measures at the state and federal level as they relate to graduation rates; and finally, 4) discuss strategies for increasing persistence and retention. We will keep in mind new data which suggest that four-year colleges and universities serving similar populations of students may display significant differences in their graduation rates.

Although we will cast a critical eye on the efficacy of using graduation rates to measure college accountability, we also want to make two things clear. First, we believe that institutions of higher education, particularly public institutions, must be—and, in fact, are—accountable for providing students with a quality education and for the proper management of federal funds. Second, we believe that student success—including college graduation—should be a matter of critical concern for government policymakers as well as college faculty, professionals and administrators. Graduation rates are not the be-all and end-all of collegiate achievement, but we do believe strongly that college persistence, particularly for minorities and first-generation-in-college students, is much lower than it should be and solutions to the problem must be found.

### **Pitfalls in Examining Graduation Rates**

The following is a summary of the principal findings of the 2003 AFT report.

- 1. Judging college persistence and retention in terms of the current federal graduation rate formula is a mistake because the snapshot generated by that formula is completely out-of-focus.** Among many shortcomings, the institutional snapshot fails to account for part-time students, who represent more than 40 percent of the student population, and the large number of students who transfer from one institution to another during their academic careers. Moreover, many students get what they want from college in terms of job skills or personal enrichment without graduating. The snapshot labels such students as failures when they really are successes.
- 2. Focusing on the college graduation rate also confuses two separate issues—the issue of dropping out of college and the issue of simply taking a long time to get a degree.** Students all over the country are persevering in college up to and beyond the six-year snapshot period, even if they have not graduated yet. For example, some students are staying in college even though they had to switch from full-time to part-time attendance. Others have to drop out for a while to tend to a child or sick relative and then return. Both these situations show up as failures if the focus is on the six-year

graduation period, but such students are actually profiles in dedication and persistence.

3. **Rewarding or punishing colleges on the basis of their graduation rates may create a perverse incentive.** It may encourage the colleges to stop serving students who are likely to have problems in persistence; alternatively, it could create an incentive to lower academic standards to ensure that graduation rates stay high.
4. **More reliable data on college persistence can be found in a federal survey that followed postsecondary students over six years, Fall 1995-Spring 2001.** This survey provides data that is much superior to the institutional graduation rate formula because it tracks students through college transfers and other changes in enrollment. For example, under the federal graduation rate formula, 51 percent of all students received some sort of degree. However, the federal survey also contains data showing college persistence rates to be higher than they often are assumed to be. Table 1 identifies the percentage of students who received any degree or certificate and the percentage still enrolled in any institution after six years by the type of institution in which they started. The total is the sum of those who received a degree or certificate and those still enrolled somewhere.

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**Table 1: Percentage of Students Who Received Any Degree and the Percentage Still Enrolled After Six Years, By Type of Institution in Which They Started: 2001**

	Any degree	Still enrolled	Total
Total	50.8	14.4	65.2
First type of institution			
Public 2-year	35.7	17.4	53.1
Public 4-year	60.2	17.3	77.5
Private 4-year	73.5	9.4	82.9
Private less-than-4-year	60.3	3.0	63.3

SOURCE: U.S. Department of Education, National Center for Education Statistics, 1996/01 Beginning Postsecondary Students Longitudinal Study [BPS: 96/01]

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Of students who started at four-year institutions, more than three-quarters had earned a bachelor's degree or were still enrolled in 2001. For students starting at public two-year institutions, the persistence rate is lower (53 percent) but not



surprisingly so, given the variety of objectives served by community colleges, their open admissions policies, and the diversity of students who attend them.

**Factors That Do Affect Retention**

The AFT report points to a variety of factors that can get in the way of students reaching their goals. It maintains that some students are at particular risk of dropping out and that there are wide gaps in completion rates—by family income, student aspirations and preparation, age and attendance pattern, and race.<sup>2</sup>

**Full-time degree status**

The report discusses the differences in graduation rates by a student’s goals and enrollment status. The following table shows the difference between following an individual institution’s graduation rates and following the individual student’s path towards a degree.

**Table 2. Percentage of Students Beginning at a 4-year Institution Who Completed a Bachelor’s Degree Within Six Years: 2001**

	Percent of total	Percent completing at first institution	Percent completing anywhere
<i>Total first-time students</i>	100.0	50.7	58.2
Started full-time	90.4	54.1	62.0
Had a B.A. goal	90.3	55.3	62.7
Started full-time and had a B.A. goal	82.9	58.0	65.6

SOURCE: U.S. Department of Education, National Center for Education Statistics, 1996/01 Beginning Post-secondary Students Longitudinal Study [BPS: 96/01]

Looking at the 1995-96 freshman cohort that started at a four-year college or university, 51 percent graduated from the institution at which they had started by the end of six years, but another 7 percent graduated from somewhere else. If students started full-time at a baccalaureate institution and had a goal of getting a bachelor’s degree, their odds of completion were better. Sixty-six percent of these students received a B.A. within six years. This result underlines the significance of students’ intentions when they enroll—intentions that can be determined by looking at student, as opposed to institutional, data.

### Academic preparation

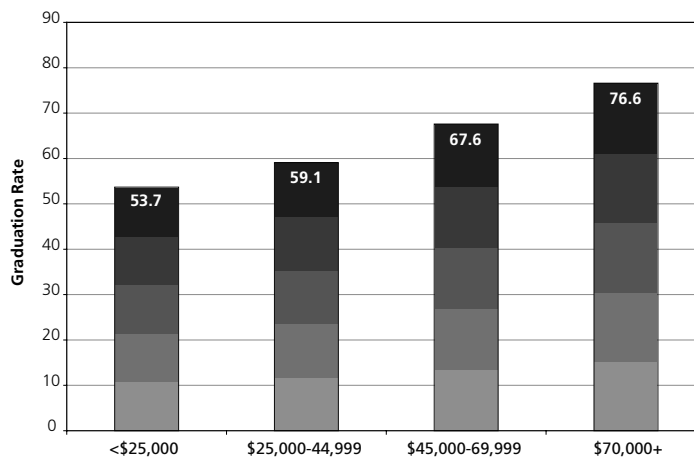
Students who have taken a rigorous high school curriculum and have high admission test scores will graduate more quickly and at a higher rate. ***In fact, according to NCES data, an institution's graduation rate can be predicted by knowing its selectivity in admission standards.*** Conversely, delaying entry into college, not having a regular high school diploma and not having taken a rigorous course of study in high school are all significant risk factors for persistence.

The first year is typically when the largest share of students leave college.<sup>3</sup> Compared with students who continue their enrollment, the first-year dropouts have three attributes that may compound other risk factors: lower academic expectations, lower first-year grades and change in the number of dependents (for women).

### Income

The report indicates that the higher the family income of a starting student, the greater are his or her chances of obtaining a baccalaureate degree. The following chart shows graduation rates for students who enrolled full time with the intent of graduating with a bachelor's degree. Again, colleges and universities that enroll lower-income students are likely to have lower graduation rates than those that enroll higher-income students.

**Chart 1. Six-Year Graduation Rates by Family Income for Bachelor's Degree Seeking Students Who Began at a Four-year Institution: 2001**



Source: U.S. Department of Education, National Center for Education Statistics, 1995-96, Beginning Postsecondary Students Longitudinal Study [BPS: 96/01]

Reports by the federal Advisory Committee on Student Financial Assistance have shown that unmet financial need, after loans, grants and other aid sources are counted in, is still considerably higher for low-income students than for middle- and high-income students, at all types of institutions.<sup>4</sup> Students with unmet need often must make extraordinary efforts to persist in their programs, attending part time and intermittently, living off campus, working long hours and going into debt. Their probability of persistence and degree completion declines as a result of such patterns.

### **Older students**

The report found that older students generally have family and job responsibilities that compete with college and extend the time to graduation or reduce the chances of graduating. Today, at least 57 percent of undergraduates are 22 or older.<sup>5</sup> It is not age by itself that accounts for the higher dropout rate, but the associated risk factors common among older students: part-time enrollment, delaying entry into college, not having a regular high school diploma, having children, being a single parent, being financially independent of parents and working full time while enrolled.<sup>6</sup>

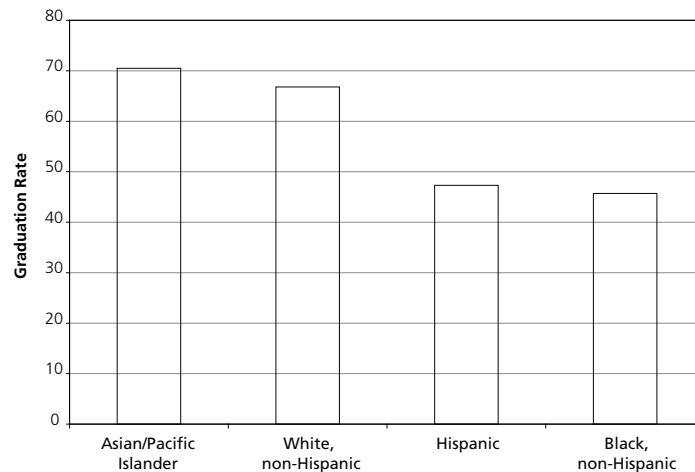
The effect of these risk factors is cumulative. The more risk characteristics a student has, the greater the chance that he or she will drop out of college. It also should be noted that many of these factors are clearly related to finances: having children, being a single parent, working full time while enrolled. According to the students participating in these surveys, the need to earn more money to support their families and/or to meet college expenses is a primary factor in their dropping out, working more or changing to part-time status.

### **Race and ethnicity**

Hispanic and black students are less likely to complete college than are Asian and white students. Race and ethnicity are closely associated with family income, which makes it difficult to disentangle the two. The following chart shows the six-year graduation rates by race for students who started full time in a four-year institution.

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**Chart 2. Six-Year Graduation Rates by Race/Ethnicity for Bachelor's Degree Seeking Students Starting at a Four-Year Institution: 2001**



SOURCE: U.S. Department of Education, National Center for Education Statistics, 1995-96, Beginning Post-secondary Students Longitudinal Study [BPS: 96/01]

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### **Institutional factors**

The data cited in the AFT report makes clear that institutional factors are much less important than student factors in determining persistence. Nevertheless, new data suggests that colleges may make a difference in whether nontraditional students succeed. The Education Trust's recent report, *One Step from the Finish Line: Higher College Graduation Rates are Within Our Reach*, makes this point strongly. Analyzing institutional graduation rates under the federal formula, the study finds that some institutions do better than others in graduating students with similar student populations. Even after taking into account financial resources, student demographics, institutional missions and other factors, these institutions still have higher graduation rates than their peers. The report goes on to list some of these successful colleges and to discuss how they, individually, have invested considerable resources and time into addressing student retention.

A follow-up study conducted by the Education Trust, the American Association of State Colleges and Universities, and the National Association of System Heads suggests that institutional leadership has a great deal to do with creating a culture of success on campus.<sup>7</sup> The institutions that were successful in retaining

and graduating students each had a culture of high expectation for all students as well as a sense of inclusiveness and institutional mission. The leadership on these campuses were seen as coordinating these practices and keeping the institution moving forward.

Other case studies suggest a number of effective on-campus support strategies. Because students are most likely to leave during the first year, extra care early-on helps. This includes assisting students in developing study skills, learning how to manage their time and money, and planning for their careers. Fostering a sense of community may be important so students do not feel adrift. Study groups, class discussions and learning communities, where first-year students are enrolled in common sets of classes, have been considered helpful in generating a sense of community, even at commuter schools. Students need access to tutorial support, adequate student aid, faculty advisors, and counselors to help solve problems and help students stay in school. Students who have extra problems need extra help. Vigorous outreach and support can make a difference. Unfortunately, the institutions attended by students who need the most help, especially open-access colleges, are often badly underfunded and do not have the staff and resources to handle their students' needs.

### **State Accountability Policies Related To Student Persistence**

When the federal government in 1990 made the reporting of graduation rates a condition for receiving Title IV aid for four-year institutions, it institutionalized graduation rates as a measurement for performance and quality. This, in turn, spurred state policymakers and higher education leaders to redouble their efforts to improve student retention and completion.

According to a recent survey by the State Higher Education Executive Officers (SHEEO), 41 states now use graduation rate data for state- and/or system-level accountability and quality assurance of its colleges and universities.<sup>8</sup> No state has legislation that uses graduation rates as the sole measurement of institutional quality. Instead, states seem to be employing a number of strategies to foster student retention and degree completion, hoping to raise graduation rates.

There are several different types of accountability systems being tied to student performance at the state level: "unit-record" data, general performance reports, statewide goals assessments and performance funding.<sup>9</sup> Each has state-level indi-

cators of institutional performance, designed to reach public audiences and used in discussions on strategic planning and national comparisons with peer groups.

### **Unit-record data**

According to a recent survey from the National Center for Higher Education Management Systems (NCHEMS), 39 states maintain a unit-record (UR) database. States collect data on individual students, following them over many years at multiple institutions across the state. Data include information such as enrollment records, performance activity, retention and completion. States most commonly created these databases to have a consistent, centralized method for reporting on student enrollment and degree activity. Of the 39 states, all collect data on key elements such as sex, race, date of birth, degree granted/awarded and program major. Variation occurs when we look at elements such as high school, geographic and credit hours information. NCHEMS estimates that these databases contain information on 69 percent of the nation's full-time-equivalent students and 73 percent of total enrolled students.<sup>10</sup> This information may be used for such state purposes as resource allocation systems based on enrollments, tracking retention and program completion among minority students, or ease in reporting to the federal government.

### **General performance reports**

These “report cards” document activity on a wide range of measures. Most states (about three-fourths) using this approach use benchmarks to compare performance to other states or they look at changes in performance over time—progress is not measured against strategic goals or performance standards.

For example, legislation in California established an advisory committee to recommend performance indicators to the legislature. The legislature then approved annual indicators in five areas: population context, fiscal context, student preparation, student access and student outcomes. The 75 performance indicators essentially serve as a reporting mechanism for public institutions to the state. Currently there are neither negative consequences nor positive rewards for any individual district or college, or for the system.<sup>11</sup>

### **Statewide goals assessment**

Several states—Texas, New Jersey and Tennessee—are using accountability reports to document institutional progress towards a few strategic state goals.

The New Jersey system began as a broad-based report of performance indicators and then moved toward a goal-oriented system. Benchmarks include graduation rates, transfer and articulation success, efficiency and effectiveness, and diversification of revenues. In addition, Texas and Tennessee have both tied state goals to the regional initiatives of the Southern Regional Education Board's "Challenge 2000" agenda. Some of the SREB goals include:

1. The percentage of adults who have attended and earned a two-year, four-year or graduate degree will be at the national level or higher.
2. Quality and effectiveness of colleges will be regularly assessed—emphasizing undergraduate performance.
3. Teacher education programs will place primary emphasis on the knowledge and performance of graduates.
4. Salaries for teachers will be competitive, reach important benchmarks and be linked to performance measures and standards.
5. States will maintain or increase state tax dollars for schools and colleges while emphasizing funding aimed at quality.<sup>12</sup>

A growing number of other states are connecting graduation rates to performance funding. The 2002 SHEEO study found 18 states where graduation rates were used in performance funding, even if it was one of multiple indicators.<sup>13</sup>

South Carolina, for example, is attempting to base all state higher education funding on performance indicators and is experimenting with a system that connects 50 indicators with resources. Similarly, Florida requires the community college system to report its performance for budgeting purposes. Incentive funding is based on measures which will require significant new data collection and research on graduates after they leave the institution (i.e., graduation and retention rates, accumulated credit hours of graduates, percentage of graduates remaining in Florida and employed at \$25,000 or more). So far, in the community college system, which has the longest history with performance funding—10 percent of total institutional funding is performance based—there has been little change. The funding has been level with colleges getting neither less nor more funding under this program.

The trend of trying to find new ways to assess accountability, including the use of graduation rates, does not seem to be slowing. According to a survey of state higher education financial officers by the Higher Education Program at the

Rockefeller Institute of Government, performance reporting is becoming the preferred approach to accountability. State policymakers, especially legislators, see performance reporting as a “no cost” alternative to performance funding and performance budgeting.<sup>14</sup>

Although performance reporting has no formal connection to budgeting, the financial officers claim that coordinating or system governing boards consider their results when making campus allocations. A significant number of legislative leaders also see performance measures as important and increasing factors in state appropriations.<sup>15</sup>

In May of 2003, the U.S. General Accounting Office conducted a survey of the state higher education executive officers in all 50 states and the District of Columbia and Puerto Rico.<sup>16</sup> Of the 52 states and territories surveyed, 48 responded. According to this study, 34 of the 48 states responding reported having at least one effort in place to increase bachelor’s degree completions. Efforts include: increasing the number of students entering higher education; helping colleges improve the retention and graduation of their students; and aiding individual students to encourage persistence and completion.

Eighteen states reported that they publish the state’s performance measures, including retention and federal graduation rates, believing that publication motivates colleges to improve their institutional quality. In Virginia and several other states, public institutions are required to measure and report retention and federally calculated graduation rates, as well as other student learning outcomes, in order to demonstrate their institutional value to their students.

Nine states have financial incentives for colleges and universities to improve performance in the areas of retention and completion. Tennessee has a performance funding program which provides institutions with an opportunity to earn a financial supplement of approximately 5.45 percent of its education and general budget. The college or university must carry out the following activities: 1) obtain accreditation; 2) test graduating students in their major fields and in general education, and demonstrate that student performance is at or above national averages on these standardized tests; 3) conduct satisfaction surveys; 4) conduct peer review of its academic programs; and 5) implement successful assessment activities.<sup>17</sup>



In Pennsylvania, the Board of Governors established a performance funding program to reward colleges and universities based on student achievement measures, university excellence and operational efficiency. Universities each year must demonstrate an improved level of performance on a series of “indicators” in order to receive a financial bonus. The indicators include student retention and graduation rates, degrees awarded and instructional cost per student. In order to qualify, a four-year institution in the state, whether public or private, must graduate more than 40 percent of in-state students within four years.<sup>18</sup>

Governors in their State of the State speeches have also used graduation rates as a way to emphasize accountability and direct public attention to their practices. In the 2005 New Mexico State of the State Address, Governor Bill Richardson stated, “we will link state funding to graduation rates to make sure our universities and colleges prepare New Mexicans for high-wage jobs.”<sup>19</sup>

### **Federal Use of Graduation Rates**

As noted in the section above, the federal government began collecting graduation rate data in 1990. Under current law, the U.S. Secretary of Education can also exceed by ten percent the authorized levels of the Supplemental Educational Opportunity Program and the College Work-Study Program for distribution to institutions with graduation or transfer rates that exceed 50 percent with no limitation on time to degree. This provision was employed under the Work-Study Program in the late 1990’s some years ago but not since.

When Congress began considering the reauthorization of the Higher Education Act in 2003, staff members in both the administration and Congress talked about the possibility of imposing stricter accountability through graduation rates—providing more money to institutions that did well and reducing funds for those that did not. After a great deal of debate in the policymaking community, Congress decided not to impose an explicit requirement of this nature. However, there are provisions in the legislation now making its way through Congress that are related to graduation rates.

Under the bills being considered in US Congress, students at certain institutions may become eligible to receive “bonus” year-round Pell Grants if: 1) for four-year colleges, their graduation rates are above 50 percent for the four preceding years; and 2) for two-year colleges, they have graduation rates above the average

in one of the last three years. Congress is also considering a provision that would tie support for Tribal Colleges to the number of Pell Grant recipients and the college's completion rates. In each of these cases, the critics maintain that the real losers would be low-income students who are denied the wherewithal to obtain an accessible education.

Another provision under consideration is "consumer profile" legislation that would change the way the federal government computes graduation rates to include information about transfers from two-year institutions. However, Congressional committees soundly rejected, on privacy grounds, a proposal to track students on a longitudinal basis in addition to tracking institutional graduation rates. Remembering, as noted above, that student-based information seems to be a better way than institutional graduation rates to evaluate retention, Congress's rejection of this approach may present problems for clarifying the persistence issue in the future.

## **Recommendations**

Clearly, there is widespread interest among government policymakers in tracking college graduation rates as a way of evaluating how well colleges and universities are educating students and preparing them for the workforce. There is also concern that some groups of students, particularly minorities, low-income and first-generation-in-college students, are not graduating in large enough numbers and that some institutions seem to be doing a better job than others in addressing this concern.

The problem, as we have attempted to present it here, is that graduation rates are not a particularly good way to assess college performance because the formula for calculating graduation rates presents a very misleading picture of student attainment. There is some promising new research on what institutions can do to improve graduation rates and there should be more of that kind of research. However, viewing graduation rates as primarily a college-generated problem, and therefore a problem for institutions to "fix," can serve to obscure the factors that have been shown to be the most important in student persistence—such as finances, family obligations and academic preparation—and to absolve policymakers from recognizing that serious expenditures of public money are necessary to attack these deeper problems.

To close these gaps and ensure that all students have a fair chance of reaping the full benefits of postsecondary education, we need to reiterate the recommendations suggested in the previous AFT report. They are as relevant now, if not more so, in the current environment. We need “greater commitments from—and stronger collaboration among—institutions of higher education, the states and the federal government.”<sup>20</sup>

### **Finances**

We have seen that income is closely related to graduation rates. Students report that financial concerns—having to care for a relative, having a child, running out of money—often were crucial in their deciding to drop out. The data also show that one of the primary reasons students leave college before graduation is that they work too much while attending college. Again, it may be politically attractive to look for a nonfinancial solution to solve persistence problems, but that will not help nontraditional students meet their financial obligations. At the local and state levels, greater support for public institutions and a refusal to shift the funding burden to students in the form of tuition would be a tremendous help. At the federal level, increases in the Pell Grant would make a big difference.

### **Academic advisement and support**

Institutions can do a number of things to foster the kind of supportive environment that helps nontraditional students succeed. The report calls for greater state and federal support, including more funding for the federal TRIO programs, which provide intervention and guidance for low-income, first-generation students. Policymakers should also look into the establishment of a new federal competitive grant program under which institutions with large numbers of nontraditional students could strengthen their efforts to identify and provide academic support to at-risk students.

### **School-college curriculum collaboration**

As noted, one stumbling block is students’ failure to take rigorous high school courses that connect to the college curriculum. To help remedy this problem, the AFT has recommended that Congress institute a program to encourage school-college collaboration around high school curriculum development. The program might bring curriculum specialists from the high schools together with curriculum specialists from higher education in the same discipline. These specialists would

strengthen high school coursework for college-bound students to accurately reflect what students will be expected to know when they enter college.

### **“Bridge” programs**

The states and the federal government also should consider instituting or expanding summer bridge programs for students from high schools that cannot provide all the resources necessary for a college prep curriculum.

### **Unanswered questions**

This paper indicates there is a need for more and better student-centered research on the causes of persistence problems. What could such research tell us? It could tell us why students drop out. It could tell us whether publicizing graduation rates has any effect on institutional performance. It could also tell us whether rewarding or punishing institutions on the basis of their graduation rates would be likely to have any real effect on retention. It would suggest negative as well as positive consequences.

We also need to look at how graduation rates, if calculated under a broader formula, could serve as useful information for some colleges and universities. Every institution should be concerned with retention and persistence issues and aware that its graduation rate may signal a larger or deeper problem on campus. However, we must not jump to any immediate conclusions about what is reflected in the graduation rates. Instead, the institution must look into the core problems of retention and persistence for all students and address those concerns. The tracking and use of graduation rates as an accountability measure is a relatively new process. Many of the states are just now collecting information and getting trend data on their state higher education institutions.

### **ENDNOTES**

<sup>1</sup> *Student Persistence in College: More Than Counting Caps and Gowns* (Washington, D.C., American Federation of Teachers, August 2003).

<sup>2</sup> There are also gender gaps in rates of persistence and completion. Although women now receive a majority of associates and bachelor's degrees, they have not yet reached parity with men in gaining Ph.D.s and professional degrees. We do not include a full analysis of gender gaps in this report. For more information, see *The Growing Gender*

*Gaps in College Enrollment and Degree Attainment in the U.S. and Their Potential Economic and Social Consequences*, Boston: Northeastern University, Center for Labor Market Studies, 2003). Available on the Business Roundtable Web site: [www.brtable.org/document.cfm/943](http://www.brtable.org/document.cfm/943).

<sup>3</sup> Ellen M. Bradburn, *Short-term Enrollment in Postsecondary Education: Student Background and Institutional Differences in Reasons for Early Departure, 1996-98*, (Washington, D.C.: U.S. Department of Education National Center for Education Statistics, 2002) NCES 2003-153.

<sup>4</sup> Advisory Committee on Student Financial Assistance, *Access Denied: Restoring the Nation's Commitment to Equal Educational Opportunity*, (Washington, D.C.: U.S. Department of Education, 2001).

<sup>5</sup> Figure based on a Census Bureau survey of 60,000 households conducted in October 2003.

<sup>6</sup> Lutz Berkner, Shirley He, and Emily Fox Catladi, *Descriptive Summary of 1995-96 Beginning Postsecondary Students: Six Years Later* (Washington, D.C.: U.S. Department of Education, National Center for Education Statistics, 2002), NCES 2003-151.

<sup>7</sup> Peter Ewell, *Student Success in State Colleges and Universities* (Washington, D.C.: American Association of State Colleges and Universities, 2005).

<sup>8</sup> American Association of State Colleges and Universities, *Accountability and Graduation Rates: Seeing the Forest and the Trees* (Washington, D.C.: American Association of State Colleges and Universities, October 2002).

<sup>9</sup> Peter Ewell et al., *Following the Mobile Student* (Washington, D.C.: National Center for Higher Education Management Systems, September 2003).

<sup>10</sup> Ibid.

<sup>11</sup> Jane V. Wellman, "Assessing State Accountability Systems". *Change*, (March/April 2001).

<sup>12</sup> Ibid.

<sup>13</sup> Joseph C. Burke and Henrik Minassians, *Performance Reporting: the Preferred 'No Cost' Accountability Program* (New York: Higher Education Program, The Nelson A. Rockefeller Institute of Government, 2002).

<sup>14</sup> Ibid.

<sup>15</sup> Joseph C. Burke and Henrik Minassians, *Linking State Resources to Campus Results: From Fad to Trend* (New York: Higher Education Program, The Nelson A. Rockefeller Institute of Government, 2001).

<sup>16</sup> United States General Accounting Office, *College Completion* (Washington, D.C.: GAO, May 2003), GEO-03-568.

<sup>17</sup> Tennessee Higher Education Commission, *Performance Funding Standards 2000-2001 through 2004-2005*. Available online at [www.state.tn.us/thec](http://www.state.tn.us/thec).

<sup>18</sup> Pennsylvania State System of Higher Education (Washington, D.C.: GAO, May 2003). Available online at [www.passhe.edu](http://www.passhe.edu).

<sup>19</sup> Bill Richardson, “New Mexico State of the State Address” (2005). Available online at [www.stateline.org](http://www.stateline.org).

<sup>20</sup> *Student Persistence*, 17.

# The Rise and Fall of SPRE: A Look at Failed Efforts to Regulate Postsecondary Education in the 1990s

BY TERESE RAINWATER

*As new accountability measures are considered, we should take note of past successes and failures in that arena. Terese Rainwater presents a case study of the State Postsecondary Review Entity (SPRE) program instituted in the 1990s and later eliminated. She offers a historical perspective and lessons learned.*

—Editors' note

## I. Introduction

**W**aste, fraud and abuse. This was the clarion call of government reform in the late 1980s and the early 1990s. In the context of higher education, critics claimed that postsecondary institutions were abusing student aid programs and students were being left with debt and no degree. Newspaper headlines proclaimed “Student-Loan Program Lambasted in Subcommittee Report,” “Lenders Assailed in Senate Investigation of Student-Loan Programs” and “Billions for School are Lost in Fraud, Waste, and Abuse.”<sup>1</sup> The United States Department of Education was criticized for allowing scams to proliferate and for mismanaging federal money. Sen. Sam Nunn (D-GA) held a series of highly publicized hearings designed to draw attention to concerns over student aid oversight and higher education accountability. During the hearings, Nunn reported that “[a]t this point in our investigation we have yet to hear of even a single part of the student-loan program that is working effectively.”<sup>2</sup> Negative media attention and public response to the Nunn hearings threatened support for the guaranteed student loan and the Pell Grant programs. As the 1992 reauthorization of the Higher Education Act (HEA) drew near, focus sharpened on three areas: 1) student loan default rates, 2) student loan abuse and fraud by the proprietary sector, and 3) higher education accountability.

This article analyzes one part of the reforms contained in the 1992 amendments to the HEA: the creation of State Postsecondary Review Entities (SPREs). In

their original conception, SPREs would be part of a joint federal/state effort to rein in the proprietary sector of postsecondary education, which many considered the main culprit in the student aid abuses. However, the purpose of the SPREs, and their regulatory reach, became much more expansive by the time the 1992 amendments were passed and the Department of Education's implementing regulations were promulgated in 1994. This article examines the historical context in which SPREs were conceived and enacted; the specific SPRE mechanism contained in the 1992 amendments to the HEA and the 1994 Department of Education regulations; and ultimately why the SPREs failed and the lessons to be learned by their failure.

## **II. Historical Context**

Between 1952 and 1992, the mechanism of postsecondary education accountability at the federal level evolved into an affiliation among the federal government, states, and national and regional accreditation agencies called the "Triad."<sup>3</sup> Each member of the Triad had designated oversight responsibilities. States were responsible for establishing requirements for and granting institutional licensure. Accreditation agencies were responsible for making judgments about institutional quality.<sup>4</sup> And the federal government was responsible for allocating and ensuring that federal funds for student aid were used for their intended purpose. In the 1992 Higher Education Amendments, Triad roles and responsibilities were clarified and expanded in what was called the "Program Integrity Triad."<sup>5</sup>

By the early 90s, there was a perception that the Triad was weak.<sup>6</sup> In addition, Congress felt that postsecondary education broadly speaking was not responsive to its concerns about the need for better higher education performance. In this context, congressional leaders approached the 1992 Higher Education Amendments with the goal of eliminating student aid abuses and improving performance by creating stricter accountability for postsecondary education through the establishment of SPREs. Under the 1992 law, each state was required to establish or designate an agency—a SPRE—to strengthen state oversight of postsecondary education in "partnership" with the federal government. However, due to flaws in the scope of the regulatory authority granted to these partnerships in the 1992 law, the SPRE concept ended almost before it began.

Like many education reforms, the origins of the SPRE concept are linked to



events that happened many years prior. The Higher Education Act of 1965, the National Vocational Student Loan Insurance Act of 1965, and the 1972 Higher Education Amendments “increased the federal dollars flowing for student assistance and, more important to the issue here, expanded the nature of the education for which those students could secure support.”<sup>7</sup> In combination, “these acts created a new world of federally supported ‘postsecondary’ education.”<sup>8</sup> Language shifted from “higher education” to “postsecondary education.”<sup>9</sup> The consequence of this small change was great: The reach of federal aid expanded from traditional degree-granting providers to include a much wider range of providers and led to a proliferation of new providers.<sup>10</sup> Soon thereafter, cases of fraud and student loan abuse rose dramatically.<sup>11</sup>

Although headlines trumpeted abuse in federal student aid programs, many states<sup>12</sup> and the Department of Education<sup>13</sup> had begun efforts in the early 1990s to control student loan default rates and other abuses of student aid programs. Sensing that the future of all student aid programs was threatened and that better regulation of the proprietary sector was needed, the State Higher Education Executives Organization (SHEEO) and a small number of states led by New York submitted a proposal during the 1992 reauthorization of the HEA. The intent behind the proposal was to strengthen the capacity of states to better perform their role in the Triad.<sup>14</sup> David Longanecker, then chairman of SHEEO and the commissioner of higher education in Minnesota, and later assistant secretary of postsecondary education, recalls, “I knew we could solve the abuse and fraud problems in student aid through good regulation and oversight. I had seen it work in Colorado and Minnesota.”<sup>15</sup>

The SHEEO proposal, which was later introduced by Reps. Goodling (R-PA) and Lowey (D-NY) as the Integrity in Higher Education Act of 1991 (HR 2716), had three primary components. First, the secretary of education was given the authority to enter into agreements with states for the purpose of approving education programs that received Title IV funds. Second, a state agency would be designated and would submit a state plan for licensing in multiple areas including student performance and institutional capacity. Third, the federal government would assist states by helping to pay for the additional oversight and regulation.<sup>16</sup>

As an outside agency, SHEEO quickly lost control of its proposal in Congress.

As the bill moved through the legislative process, it changed in important ways. Originally, the bill was targeted at improving state oversight and eliminating student aid abuses in the proprietary sector, particularly non-degree-granting institutions. In the final bill, the focus broadened to encompass concerns about accountability in postsecondary education as a whole. According to James R. Mingle, SHEEO's executive director, the SHEEO community became divided over the SPRE issue. In general, states with strong oversight and regulation were in favor of the SPRE legislation while states with weak oversight and regulation were opposed.<sup>17</sup> In addition, the final bill used the rhetoric of "partnership," but the federal government maintained a dominant role in the law's approach to regulating postsecondary accountability. State plans and standards had to be submitted to the Department of Education for their review and approval. Moreover, the Department of Education maintained oversight of both SPREs and accreditors.<sup>18</sup>

Finally, the bill included multiple points of redundancy for the three Triad partners, hoping that overkill would end student aid abuses. For example, accreditors, which had been left out of the original bill, were included in the final version, "but with new statutorily-defined requirements."<sup>19</sup> Contrary to the historical role of accreditors, the new requirements included "federally mandated review standards that included default rates in student loan programs" as well as "curricula, admission practices, and student success."<sup>20</sup> Redundancy extended to the state part of the Triad as well in that, once "triggered" review began, SPREs found that they were required to consider matters of student assessment as well as institutional viability.<sup>21</sup> Finally, as a result of its oversight of the other Triad partners, the Department of Education "was seen as beginning a new federal involvement in the substance of the education process."<sup>22</sup>

The SPRE concept was the George H.W. Bush administration's solution to the problems of better consumer protection and better state oversight in postsecondary education. The administration was confident that it would be serving another term when rule-making began.<sup>23</sup> Against the odds, SPRE survived a change in presidential leadership. Bill Clinton won the 1992 elections and embraced the SPRE legislation as part of his "New Federalism."<sup>24</sup>

Legislation authorizing SPRE was enacted in 1992 and implementation was under discussion soon thereafter. As they related to SPREs, the 1992 amendments

had three primary requirements. First, each governor was required to establish a SPRE. Second, each SPRE was required to develop a plan, submitted to the Department of Education for approval, based on 17 standards enumerated in the law, explaining how it would oversee institutional performance. Third, each SPRE was required to conduct reviews of postsecondary institutions that had “triggered” a performance review due to failure to meet as few as one of 11 different statutory criteria.<sup>25</sup> For example, an institution would trigger a review if its student-loan default rates for fiscal year 1992 were at least 25 percent or if two-thirds or more of its education and general expenditures came from the federal student aid programs.<sup>26</sup>

In April 1994, the Department of Education promulgated final SPRE regulations.<sup>27</sup> By August 1994, the department had notified approximately 2,000 institutions that they had failed to meet one of the trigger areas. Simultaneously, states were engaged in the difficult process of developing state plans for department review. Concurrent to state implementation efforts, other groups in the higher education community, particularly the independent sector, were deeply and publicly concerned about the new oversight requirements. In large part, the higher education community as a whole was unaware of the implications of the law until after it had passed. Many understood that the House of Representatives strongly desired change, but they also were aware that the Senate did not feel as strongly. As a result, they believed that the Senate would protect their interests. The bill passed and the higher education community was taken unaware.<sup>28</sup> Thus SPRE materialized in a context that was defined by four factors: a focus on student aid abuses, weak oversight structures, a growing accountability movement in postsecondary education, and a higher education community that was surprised by the law.

After the 1992 amendments and the promulgation of the department’s regulations, a vigorous debate ensued among the postsecondary education community about how and whether to implement SPRE. The independent sector was the most outspoken in its objections to the regulations. The primary objection to SPRE was that the “provisions undermine[d] the historic independence of private colleges and universities” through “haphazard and capricious regulatory enforcement.”<sup>29</sup> For those who were opposed to SPRE, help was about to arrive. In November 1994, the Republicans in the House, led by Newt Gingrich, introduced their Contract with America. They promised to reduce government

regulation, and eliminating SPRE was a promise they could fulfill.<sup>30</sup>

In March 1995, Congress withdrew funding and ended implementation, thereby eliminating SPRE, in a vote on budget rescissions.<sup>31</sup> Even though SPRE was mandated for every state wanting to participate in federal student aid programs, only two states—New York and Tennessee—successfully completed the implementation process.<sup>32</sup> Once SPRE was eliminated, the debate about SPRE immediately ceased. Policymakers and educators were exhausted from the debate and there was little examination of the viability of future state/federal relationships in higher education, the viability of the work states had engaged in to implement SPRE, or the implications of greater federal or state concerns about higher education accountability.

### **III. Why SPRE Failed**

The primary reasons for SPRE's failure are detailed below. Each sector of the higher education community had different objections to the idea. In order to understand why SPRE failed, it is helpful to understand the objections of each sector.

#### **State perspective**

From the state point of view, the fraud and abuse problem in student aid programs was the result of the federal government's decision to expand Part H eligibility to the proprietary sector. Most state higher education agencies had not regulated the proprietary sector. The proprietary sector, in some states, was considered part of the business community, not the postsecondary education community, and therefore oversight from state higher education agencies was inappropriate.<sup>33</sup> The states that had supported the original SHEEO proposal were actively pursuing higher education accountability agendas and, equally important, they had developed a strong regulatory capacity to pursue this agenda. In addition, these states had already laid the necessary groundwork for accountability in their states and had built trust among the (nonproprietary) higher education institutions in their states. Despite their readiness and initial support for SPRE, even these states eventually objected to the dominance the Department of Education assumed as implementation began.

For states that had not pursued higher education accountability, the uniform

requirements of SPRE were at best unnecessary and at worst unfair. SPRE's final regulations stated that the purpose of the legislation was to "eliminate fraud and abuse." But some states did not have high default rates and did not see a need for SPRE. For other states, the issue of capacity seemed insurmountable. They did not have large staffs as some states did, and the process of developing standards was "enormously difficult," requiring "multiple drafts."<sup>34</sup> Building capacity meant more than adding staff. It meant building support among policymakers, institutions, and the public for higher education accountability. Some states felt that SPRE conflicted with their traditional roles of coordinating, planning and policy.<sup>35</sup> For these states, "SPRE's regulatory and adversarial emphases were fundamentally inconsistent with [the] state's own policy agenda and its relationship with the higher education community."<sup>36</sup>

Yet some problems with implementation plagued every state, despite their differences. States found the process of developing state plans and acceptable standards for the Department of Education cumbersome and fraught with miscommunication. While the legislation maintained that SPRE's were a "partnership" between the states and the federal government, the process of developing state plans seemed to reveal a federal "recipe for success" at which the states needed to guess until they got it right.<sup>37</sup> There was no assessment on behalf of the federal government about the ability to implement SPRE in the states, and there was no training for implementation. Deadlines were tight and technical assistance was seemingly unavailable.

Taken together, the lack of attention to skill, culture, and relationships...might well have resulted in paced and deliberate programs of training and consultation among the parties as a first step in implementation. The scope of the law and the schedule demands left little room for such an effort.<sup>38</sup>

### **Independent perspective**

The independent sector was deeply opposed to the SPRE legislation.<sup>39</sup> The 17 designated standards for state plans and the 11 statutory criteria for institutional review threatened institutional autonomy and academic freedom by providing both the federal government and the states with too much authority. Accreditation was the appropriate venue to insure quality and the means by which institutions should be held accountable. The National Association for Independent

Colleges and Universities (NAICU) vociferously and effectively lobbied against SPRE. NAICU argued that the new “regulations go well beyond the increased oversight of financial aid programs, and extend federal and state authority into curricula, faculty and tuition.” SPRE “could be particularly damaging to independent colleges by applying standards intended for short-term vocational programs to nonprofit liberal arts institutions with fundamentally different missions.”<sup>40</sup>

### **Proprietary perspective**

In general, the proprietary sector was in favor of SPRE. Proprietary institutions were used to more directive accountability measures and regulations. Most were confident that their performance was high and welcomed the chance to be more fully included in the higher education community. Once the implementation began, however, concerns arose. As states began developing the standards required by SPRE, it was not clear if the proprietary sector was going to be faced with more or stricter standards than the other sectors. While SPRE required that states consult with institutions in the process of developing state plans and standards, it did not specify when or how often institutions were to be consulted.<sup>41</sup> The result was that some states developed two sets of standards: one for the proprietary sector and another for everyone else. Maryland, for example, developed two sets of standards, and the proprietary sector was isolated from the rest of the state’s higher education community.<sup>42</sup> Thus, the chance for the proprietary sector to sit at the higher education table was entirely dependent upon the state.

## **IV. Lessons Learned**

### **Lesson One**

SPRE had positive and lasting effects on the ways that states understood their role in regulating higher education. First, because states took their implementation of the SPRE requirements seriously, they became keenly aware of the importance of the boundaries between state and federal authority over postsecondary education. Second, the SHEEO agencies in states, traditionally focused on public and private institutions, had the opportunity to learn about and from the other higher education providers in their states. Third, state information systems that were improved or created as a result of the SPRE process had the effect of improving the data used in assessing performance and outcomes.<sup>43</sup>

### **Lesson Two**

As the SHEEO proposal moved through Congress, it changed from a bill with a clear but narrow problem definition to a bill that regulated all of higher education without recognition of difference. This uniformity was based on a principled decision that all of higher education could benefit from greater accountability.<sup>44</sup> Ultimately, however, state culture must be acknowledged. States are different, and applying the same solutions without regard to this difference is likely to produce poor results. A “one-size-fits-all” accountability system is not the solution to increasing performance in higher education.

### **Lesson Three**

The bitter debate surrounding SPRE made it nearly impossible to form another federal/state partnership of this kind. “SPRE had a disastrous effect on the relationship between the DOE and the states and institutions.”<sup>45</sup> And there is widespread agreement that another SPRE-like experiment would be a mistake. A better implementation structure would have been contracts between the federal government and each state with clearly defined outcomes. Contracts would have provided better problem definition and provided the states with the flexibility they needed to address different issues in their states.<sup>46</sup>

### **Lesson Four**

On their own initiative, states needed to address the broad question of higher education accountability before the issue reached Congress. Waiting for Congress to impose regulation was a mistake because Congress did not have the capacity to regulate with the unique aspects of each state in mind.<sup>47</sup> Applying force to produce change did not work. “Congress was wrong about their ability to make states do the federal government’s business.”<sup>48</sup> What the federal government could and did do well was make the Department of Education act against fraud and abuse, particularly in the proprietary sector.<sup>49</sup> Subsequently, over 1,000 institutions went out of business as a result of the department’s actions.<sup>50</sup>

### **Lesson Five**

The solution to waste, fraud and abuse in student aid programs was to clarify the definition of each Triad partner’s role without the redundancy introduced by the 1992 amendments. For many, support for the 1992 amendments came because they thought that roles of the Triad would be clarified and strengthened. The opposite was true. The overlap in the Triad roles caused confusion among the

Triad partners and the institutions they served. It did not solve the fraud and abuse problems in student aid programs. The overlap violated the long-standing principle that roles should be distinct and mutually exclusive.

## **V. Conclusion**

Is higher education accountability headed in the right direction? Did SPRE set higher education accountability on the right path? While the answers to these questions vary, there is widespread agreement on basic principles. Higher education accountability needs to move beyond statements of institutional mission and measurement of institutional outputs (e.g., measuring productivity in terms of credit hours). Instead, the focus should be on student outcomes. Degree completion should be defined not only in terms of what program of study students have completed, but by what students have learned, what skills they have attained, and whether they are able to participate as citizens, community members and workers. In addition, higher education should be held accountable for research it conducts on behalf of the public. And higher education should be held accountable for contributing to the community and regions in which institutions belong: for being “stewards of place.”<sup>51</sup> Higher education accountability systems should be performance-based, transparent, accountable to the public and benchmarked to the performance of other states.<sup>52</sup>

The danger in any accountability system is that process becomes more important than substance. Performance measures are identified to meet the requirements of the accountability system, but the substantive issues are little affected. SPRE is a case in point. While there was broad agreement about the need end to student aid abuses, the legislation and implementation of SPRE became the focus of the higher education community’s collective frustration. Additionally, performance measures can be too narrowly defined or used to obscure real problems by overwhelming users with information and by overwhelming institutions with the demand to provide it.

Accountability systems need to be developed with specific state needs in mind. Is higher education serving fairly and justly all of the people it should be serving? What do citizens need? How can higher education improve educational attainment? Should it help to create jobs and build workforce capability, to improve civic participation and strengthen communities? The answers to these questions will identify the public purposes of higher education and should form



the basis for higher education accountability.

The good intentions behind SPRE—better consumer protection, better accountability and better data—continue to play an important role in postsecondary education despite the overall failure of the regulatory scheme. SPRE failed because Congress lost sight of the problem, which was student aid abuse in the proprietary sector. Had Congress and the Department of Education remained focused on that problem, the newly created SPREs probably would still be overseeing the administration of federal aid dollars at proprietary institutions.<sup>53</sup> Instead of that, Congress in the mid 1990s turned to direct federal intervention to address these issues.

#### ENDNOTES

<sup>1</sup> Mark Pitsch, "Student-Loan Program Lambasted in Subcommittee Report," *Education Week*, May 29, 1991, 20; Christopher Myers, "Lenders Assailed in Senate Investigation of Student-Loan Programs," *Chronicle of Higher Education*, October 3, 1990, A29.; William A. Morrill and Rebecca Adamson, "Gatekeeping" (Washington, D.C.: U.S. Department of Education, Office of the Under Secretary, Planning and Evaluation Service, 1997, photocopied), 3.

<sup>2</sup> Myers, "Lenders Assailed in Senate Investigation," A29.

<sup>3</sup> 59 Fed. Reg. 22286.

<sup>4</sup> For information about how the 1992 Higher Education amendments affected accreditation see: Mathew W. Finkin, "The Unfolding Tendency in the Federal Relationship to Private Accreditation in Higher Education," *Law and Contemporary Problems*, Autumn 1994; Jeffery C. Martin, "Recent Developments Concerning Accrediting Agencies in Postsecondary Education," *Law and Contemporary Problems*, Autumn 1994; Mark L. Pelesh, "Regulations under the Higher Education Amendments of 1992: A Case Study in Negotiated Rulemaking," *Law and Contemporary Problems*, Autumn 1994.

<sup>5</sup> Ibid; See also, Higher Education Amendments of 1992, P.L. 102-325(S1150), Title IV, Part H.

<sup>6</sup> David A. Longanecker (Assistant Secretary of Postsecondary Education, United States Department of Education, 1993-1999 and current Executive Director, Western Interstate Commission for Higher Education), interview by author, notes, 30 June 2005, Education Commission of the States, Denver.

<sup>7</sup> Finkin, "The Unfolding Tendency," 99.

<sup>8</sup> Ibid, 99-100. The author explains the impact the language change had on quality control by noting that "...a major problem with this broadened inclusiveness was that the antecedent quality control system, reliance on private accreditation, hinged upon a

concept of institutional eligibility that derived from the stable world of traditional public and nonprofit degree-granting institutions. The concept was inapplicable to the world of vocational education, in which the key concern is the individual course of instruction... These courses are offered not only in stable, publicly operated community colleges or vocational/technical schools, but also in the unstable world of anywhere from 7,000 to 30,000 proprietary schools (no one seems to know quite how many) that might close, reopen, change hands, or alter their courses on a moment's notice."

<sup>9</sup> National Center for Higher Education Management Systems, "Federal State Partnerships in Postsecondary Education: SPRE as a Test Case" (Boulder, Colo.: National Center for Higher Education Management Systems, 1999, photocopied) 12.

<sup>10</sup> Ibid. See also, Larry E. Gladieux, and Thomas R. Wolanin, *Congress and the Colleges* (Lexington, Mass.: Lexington Books, 1976).

<sup>11</sup> Ibid., 14.

<sup>12</sup> For example, California, Florida, Georgia and New York strengthen oversight laws for the proprietary sector. Ibid.

<sup>13</sup> "Prior to 1992, the department had already taken measures to reduce the default rate and had removed 607 schools with high cohort rates (up through and including the FY 1992 rates) since statutory authority for removing high default schools was enacted under the Omnibus Reconciliation Act (OBRA) of 1990." Morrill "Gatekeeping," 5. By 1998, the Department of Education had made huge strides in fixing the fraud and abuse problems in student aid programs. In testimony to the U.S. House of Representatives in March, 1998, David Longanecker, Assistant Secretary of Postsecondary Education, reported, "Over the past six years, the department has collected almost \$4.5 billion on defaulted loans." At the same time, the department reduced the Federal Family Education Loan (FFEL) default rate from 22.4 percent in 1990 to 10.4 percent in 1995. U.S. Department of Education, "Statement of David A. Longanecker, Assistant Secretary, Office of Postsecondary Education to the Subcommittee on Government Management, Information, and Technology, U. S. House of Representatives Committee on Government Reform and Oversight," Hearing on Legislative Proposals in the Debt Collection Area, March 2, 1998. Accessed on the Internet, October 24, 2005. [www.ed.gov/offices/OLCA/longnk2](http://www.ed.gov/offices/OLCA/longnk2)

<sup>14</sup> Don Nolan (Former Deputy Commissioner of Higher Education, Board of Regents, New York State Department of Education), interview by author, notes, 23 August 2005, Education Commission of the States, Denver.

<sup>15</sup> Longanecker, interview by author, 30 June 2005.

<sup>16</sup> National Center for Higher Education Management Systems, "Federal State Partnerships in Postsecondary Education: SPRE as a Test Case," 12.

<sup>17</sup> James R. Mingle (Executive Director, State Higher Education Executive Officers, SHEEO, 1984-2000), interview by author, notes, 8 August 2005, Education Commission of the States, Denver.

<sup>18</sup> Morrill, "Gatekeeping," 17.

<sup>19</sup> National Center for Higher Education Management Systems, “Federal State Partnerships in Postsecondary Education: SPRE as a Test Case,” 15.

<sup>20</sup> Morrill, “Gatekeeping,” 17. See also, (Section 496(a)(5)).

<sup>21</sup> See (Section 494C(d)).

<sup>22</sup> Morrill, “Gatekeeping,” 17.

<sup>23</sup> Longanecker, interview by author, 30 June 2005.

<sup>24</sup> Ibid.

<sup>25</sup> Title IV, Part H of the Higher Education Act.

<sup>26</sup> Morrill, “Gatekeeping,” 14.

<sup>27</sup> Ibid, 20.

<sup>28</sup> Longanecker, interview by author, 30 June 2005.

<sup>29</sup> David L. Warren “Why Faculty Should Care about Federal Regulation of Higher Education,” *Academe*, July-August 1994: 19.

<sup>30</sup> Longanecker, interview by author, 30 June 2005.

<sup>31</sup> Morrill, “Gatekeeping,” 20.

<sup>32</sup> Ibid, 15.

<sup>33</sup> Mingle, interview by author, 8 August 2005.

<sup>34</sup> Peter Ewell, (Vice-President, National Center for Higher Education Management Systems), interview by author, notes, 11 August 2005, Education Commission of the States, Denver.

<sup>35</sup> Morrill, “Gatekeeping,” 21.

<sup>36</sup> National Center for Higher Education Management Systems, “Federal State Partnerships in Postsecondary Education: SPRE as a Test Case,” 17.

<sup>37</sup> Peter Ewell, interview by author, 11 August 2005.

<sup>38</sup> Morrill, “Gatekeeping,” 33.

<sup>39</sup> New York is the exception. “[T]he association of independent institutions in New York—unlike independent associations elsewhere—found little new or alarming in...the enacted legislation.” Morrill, “Gatekeeping,” 13.

<sup>40</sup> David Warren (President of the National Association of Independent Colleges and Universities), statement to his membership, 16 November 1993.

<sup>41</sup> Morrill, "Gatekeeping," 33. This was true for all sectors.

<sup>42</sup> Ibid, 39.

<sup>43</sup> Peter Ewell, interview by author, 11 August 2005.

<sup>44</sup> Tom Wolanin (Former Staff Director, U. S. House of Representatives Subcommittee on Postsecondary Education and current Senior Associate, Institute for Higher Education Policy), interview by author, notes, 16 August 2005, Education Commission of the States, Denver.

<sup>45</sup> Morrill, "Gatekeeping," 41.

<sup>46</sup> Peter Ewell, interview by author, 11 August 2005. See also, Morrill, "Gatekeeping," 48-50.

<sup>47</sup> Edward Elmendorf, (Senior Vice President, American Association of State Colleges and Universities), interview by author, notes, 31 August 2005, Education Commission of the States, Denver.

<sup>48</sup> Mingle, interview by author, 8 August 2005.

<sup>49</sup> Ibid.

<sup>50</sup> Edward Elemendorf, interview by author, 31 August 2005; Longanecker, interview by author, 30 June 2005.

<sup>51</sup> American Association of State Colleges and Universities, *Stepping Forward as Stewards of Place* (Washington, D.C: American Association of States Colleges and Universities, 2002).

<sup>52</sup> Peter Ewell, interview by author, 11 August 2005.

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# Book Review of *Achieving Accountability in Higher Education: Balancing Public, Academic, and Market Demands* by Joseph C. Burke (editor)

BY KELLY R. RISBEY

As postsecondary education becomes more important to state and national prosperity, debates about the quality and efficiency of higher education continue to rage. A higher education institution often agrees to implement some measure of accountability to appease the critics who charge that academia is inefficient and ineffective. However, the price of appeasement sometimes proves to be high. The accountability measure can become the primary indicator of the institution's success and a major factor in setting the institution's priorities. A narrow focus on specific accountability issues may cause government officials, concerned citizens and academic administrators to lose sight of the complex nature of higher education.

The impact of such "accountability myopia" is explored throughout *Achieving Accountability in Higher Education: Balancing Public, Academic, and Market Demands* (Jossey-Bass, 2004), edited by Joseph C. Burke. By examining how nine specific accountability measures are related to state demands, market forces and academic needs, the essays in Burke's collection provide evidence of how accountability pressures are influencing what is valued in higher education. This review focuses on the narrowing of perspectives, as detailed in *Achieving Accountability*, and suggests one way in which to counteract accountability myopia in higher education.

*Achieving Accountability* describes how broad accountability forces are challenging public and private higher education institutions to adapt in response to state and national priorities. Zumeta (Chapter 2) describes how state and federal

demands for accountability have extended to include private higher education institutions. In seven states, for example, private higher education institutions are included in their state's performance reporting mandates and must submit reports that include data on a number of student accountability indicators. Private institutions also are facing increasing national pressure to restrain tuition costs, increase student retention and graduation rates, and assess student learning.

Richardson and Smalling (Chapter 3) outline ways in which academic governance can support federal and state demands for increased accountability and retain institutional shared governance. This is often accomplished through enhancements of system-level governance structures—such as state-wide higher education systems, coordinating boards, and planning agencies—that encompass large numbers of higher education institutions in a state. These initial chapters provide readers with clear illustrations of how accountability is shaping higher education and how higher education is responding to these changes.

*Achieving Accountability* also discusses and critiques nine specific accountability measures. These measures focus on institutional needs, state priorities and national concerns. The book considers how each accountability measure is redefining academia. National higher education experts critique how academic needs, legislative demands and market forces influence what measures are used most often in higher education. These discussions provide readers with a comprehensive understanding of each accountability measure and its policy implications, as well as some insights into the myopia that can ensue if higher education, the public and the state begin to value only that which is being measured.

At the institutional level, quality higher education is equated most often with positive measures of student learning and engagement. Accountability measures that target institutional needs regarding student learning include accreditation (Wolff, Chapter 4), assessment (Ewell, Chapter 5), standardized testing (Erwin, Chapter 6), student and alumni surveys (Kuh, Chapter 7), and academic audits (Massy, Chapter 8). As external demands for objective evidence of student learning increase, higher education must incorporate more of these accountability measures, and expend greater resources, to prove to the public that students are receiving a quality education. In an era of fiscal constraint, and with more money devoted to measuring student learning, the essays in *Achieving*



*Accountability* warn academic leaders against neglecting key aspects of higher education such as faculty and staff development, research, and service.

Higher education also must contend with state and national accountability demands. From the state perspective, quality higher education is linked not only to student learning but also to acceptance, retention, and graduation rates; job preparation; and other factors relating to the benefits students and the state derive from their investment in higher education. These measures are captured in state-by-state report cards (Callan and Finney, Chapter 9) and performance funding mechanisms (Burke, Chapter 10). Higher education institutions often have no choice but to participate in these state-level measures of accountability; failure to comply might have negative consequences on both state appropriations and academic reputation. As the lens through which higher education is viewed narrows to comply with state demands for data and information, academic leaders also must remember academic endeavors not currently valued by the state but which could be cast into the public spotlight at any time.

National-level demands for higher education accountability often are achieved through ratings, rankings, and groupings of public and private institutions (Volkwein and Grunig, Chapter 11). At the national level, quality higher education is defined largely by student access, completion, affordability, and quality of life, and to a lesser extent by institutional reputation and resources. *Achieving Accountability* reinforces how higher education is being defined and evaluated largely through a student learning paradigm, and how this learning is but one of many important aspects of higher education. Those internal and external to academia must remain cognizant of this accountability myopia and its potential impact on higher education issues that are absent from the public spotlight.

Throughout *Achieving Accountability*, Burke and his colleagues provide readers with numerous examples of data, reports and policies that help measure higher education quality. The examples include specific data indicators such as student learning outcomes, graduation rates, faculty workload, staff diversity, sponsored research, student transfers and standardized test scores. They also provide broader information on teaching and learning processes, institutional achievements, curriculum design, high school preparedness, alumni perceptions and student satisfaction, to name a few. Together, the information in these examples can help counteract the myopic approach to measuring success, an approach

that relies on a few government-mandated indicators of student learning.

*Achieving Accountability* asks us to replace such a myopic viewpoint with a broader appreciation of higher education as a complex system involving students, faculty, support staff, administrators, and dynamic relationships with the state and federal government. Burke and his colleagues stress that a concerted effort must be made to educate the public on the diverse types of data, to disclose these data in a timely manner, and to communicate the findings in uncomplicated language. Although this effort may seem daunting, the rewards of such disclosure and transparency include greater public trust in and respect for higher education that exists not only to educate students but also to seek and advance knowledge that will benefit all citizens of the state.

Everyone involved in higher education accountability—both internal and external to academia—is strongly encouraged to read and reflect upon the current accountability issues discussed in *Achieving Accountability in Higher Education* and to consider how these issues influence the ways in which higher education is defined, measured and evaluated.

# Book Review of *College Unranked: Affirming Educational Values in College Admissions* by Lloyd Thacker (editor)

BY GREG DUBROW

Accountability is a word that has become very familiar to university administrators. Increasingly over the past two decades, public college officials have been dealing with state legislators demanding accountability for tax-payer appropriations. More recently the accountability focus has shifted to student learning and graduation rates. Meanwhile, officials at private institutions are facing calls to show a return on the significant financial investment their students make.

While the college admissions process has been the subject of a fair amount of criticism over the last two decades, hardly any attention has been focused on accountability in admissions, which has become, according to the critics, a crassly commercialized and hyper-commodified process. In one sense, accountability in the admissions process is measured every day—admissions personnel are held accountable for the number of students admitted, the number turned away, and the characteristics of admitted students. However, critics contend that this is the *wrong type* of accountability and the wrong way to look at college admissions. Instead, say the critics, we ought to be focusing on educational values and developing good fits between students and institutions—not the prestige game.

The negative effects of the commodification of the college admissions process is not a new topic, nor has the criticism been limited to admissions. Cries of commercialism in higher education have run long and deep: At the turn of the 20th century, Thorstein Veblen referred sarcastically to college presidents as “captains of erudition” (a play on the term “captain of industry”) who were managing

the affairs of their institutions more like robber baron capitalists and less like educators.

Much of the criticism of college admissions has come from mass media and higher education researchers, not the people who do the counseling, recruiting and those who make admissions decision-making. In mass media, the *Atlantic Monthly* of late has been home to James Fallows' survey of admissions directors and his scathing follow-up analysis. The *Atlantic's* concern is not new, however; their coverage of the issue goes back to 1979. Fallows' central premise is that college admissions has become a game that is corrupt on all sides. He rails against college administrators who seek to boost guidebook rankings by soliciting scores of applicants who do not stand a chance at admission, thereby artificially lowering admit rates. Fallows also takes aim at students for applying to too many colleges, for focusing on prestige at the expense of "best fit," and for using independent consultants who advise students to write formulaic essays. Parents also take flak from Fallows for the extent of their involvement in the process, sometimes to the point of sacrificing the student's desires to their own.

A host of researchers including David Breneman and Patricia McDonough have chronicled the frenzy over admission to the prestige market and the use of private counseling resources by middle- and upper-income students fearful of sliding down the economic ladder. Back in 1979 David Reisman warned of an already commercialized admissions process and predicted correctly that things would only get worse with the post-baby-boom decline in the pool of college-age students.

Given the stakes associated with admission to the most prestigious undergraduate institutions, some think it is time to account for the place of educational values in college admissions. Enter Lloyd Thacker.

According to Thacker, the college admissions process has become a soulless, corrupt and hypercommercialized process in which both student and college have become nothing more than crassly marketed product. Thacker, a veteran college counselor and admissions officer, in the past year has led a crusade against what he sees as wrong with college admissions. His nonprofit group, The Education Conservancy, was founded initially to publish his book, *College Unranked: Affirming Educational Values in College Admissions* (The Educa-

tion Conservancy, 2004). Now the group serves as Thacker's base for imploring students and admissions officers not to succumb to the evils of marketing and to bring some rationality back to the process. He advocates for a system that will help students focus on which school will best meet their educational and social needs, rather than which is trendy or will look good on a resume.

*College Unranked* features 20 short essays by a host of people involved in college admissions. Thacker contributes introductory and ending pieces, as well as "editor's story" essays, anecdotes from his career in counseling and admissions that link the sections of the book. Most of the contributions come from college deans or directors of admissions, ranging from those who work at the most prestigious schools to representatives from "the other 96 percent." These other schools do the heavy lifting in American higher education, as Harold Wingood, Dean of Admissions at Clark University, writes in his contribution "Establishing the Right Perspective Regarding College Admissions." Wingood writes that media stories about what's wrong with college admissions, particularly early admissions programs, come from a too-narrow focus on a tiny segment of American higher education, one that is not truly representative of the landscape. At the same time, Wingood maintains that this "elite" segment serves as a model for college presidents with aspirations for their institutions, and more important, serves as the factory for maintaining the country's economic and social elite. As such, this segment is the public face of American higher education.

The range of topics covered in the book includes accountability, commercialism, the purpose of education and core professional values. Though focused around a set of common themes, the essays are written to different audiences. Some essays are written to fellow admissions professionals, some to students, some to parents and some to the world in general. A few essays are written from the dual perspective of admissions professional and parent of a college-bound student. Some essays are railing against the system, some are essentially mea culpas, and some, including one from Harvard University, are both. Admissions professionals from the elite schools revile the very system they have created and fostered. This is not to dismiss the point made by the Harvard authors (William Fitzsimmons, Marlyn McGrath Lewis and Charles Ducey) nor to call them hypocrites. Rather, the very fact that officials from Harvard would acknowledge publicly that the "frenzied search for the brass ring" (p. 25) has created students who are programmed from pre-K onward to do the things that will get them into the right

college is very telling; they know that the system is broken. Their essay does beg the question, however, of just what they plan to do to help fix things.

Accountability is a major theme in the book, the subject of two of Thacker's editor's stories and a number of essays. These essays discuss the College Board and ways in which colleges manipulate data in order to improve their ranking in the *U.S. News & World Report* and other guides. Mark Speyer's essay compares the numbers games played to increase ranking scores to the Soviet plant managers who manipulated output to make their numbers looked better, never mind that the product was flawed or useless. Speyer decries the influence of external forces like ranking on the admissions process, arguing that college officials will solicit applications from students who do not have a shot at gaining entry, solely for the purpose of lowering the admit rates. James Sumner argues a similar point, wondering why there is no penalty for submitting misleading numbers to *U.S. News* and guidebooks such as Peterson's or the College Board, and why those agencies do not demand specific figures.

Ted O'Neil's contribution offers the most pointed criticism. O'Neil, Dean of Admission at University of Chicago and a long-time member of various College Board committees, tells of being wined and dined at College Board membership meetings. He questions the extravagant spending by the College Board, a non-profit group financed by membership and testing fees, with a mission to ensure fairness in testing and financial aid. O'Neil calls disastrous and unseemly the decision by the College Board to spin off a forprofit entity, collegeboard.com. He asks whether by overtly seeking profit, the College Board is acting in the best interest of its members and the students who pay hefty fees for testing. O'Neil also takes issue with the high cost of Advanced Placement testing, noting that low-income students are priced out of the service, despite the fact that they can benefit as much (if not more) from AP credits as students from wealthier families.

The nature and purpose of education and going to college is the subject of a number of essays. The general lament is that the competition for the few spaces in the prestige segment schools has caused students to spend their middle and high school years as educational preprofessionals, maximizing every moment for the goal of getting into the right college, and not spending enough time just being teenagers. Kim Stafford writes as a concerned parent accompanying his daughter to a college recruiting event. He wonders how his daughter is handling

the stresses and irrationality of the college selection process. He also expresses concern for another student who is so stressed out that he runs out to vomit while a college representative is speaking. Other essayists talk about student burn-out; the role of parents in the process; and whether students, parents and admissions officers pay enough attention to the basic purpose of education: the accumulation of knowledge and development of critical thinking skills. The common theme is that students should opt out of the prestige game and focus more on aligning the culture of the colleges they are considering with their own personalities. Students, parents and admissions officers are urged to put learning and personal development ahead of the search for the brass ring, the implicit assumption being that the ring will be earned if the student takes care of what is important.

The essay-to-essay quality is generally good, and the tone thankfully is conversational and not laden with research jargon and wonkishness. The voices are generally those of knowledgeable people who see a world askew and offer good-hearted suggestions about how to set things back in balance. The voice that is noticeably missing is the students'. For all the talk of what is wrong with admissions and the resulting deleterious effects on students' psyches and educations, we do not hear from those students. After a dozen essays from adults, the reader starts to wonder what students think about all of this. Why do they reach for the brass ring? What do they think of being inundated by brochures, CD-ROMs, invitations to college nights? How do they handle the pressures of keeping their grades up while participating in a daunting set of necessary extracurricular activities? If there is a *College Unranked II*, one hopes that student voices will feature prominently in the mix.

Thacker gets the conversation started from the inside out. It is refreshing to hear college presidents, admissions deans and other adults own up to the fact that something is not quite right. Whether anything will change is the big question, and that begs more questions: If change depends on people being held accountable for their actions, what might that change look like? What would accountability in college admissions entail? Who could or should lead the way? Thacker's collection, building on other critiques, most notably the *Atlantic Monthly* articles, serves as a useful starting point.

# American Academic

## Contributors

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